OLD PEOPLE AND THE THINGS THAT PASS

LOUIS COUPERUS

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THE BOOKS OF THE SMALL SOULS

By

LOUIS COUPERUS

Translated by

ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

I. SMALL SOULS.

II. THE LATER LIFE.

III. THE TWILIGHT OF THE SOULS.

IV. DR. ADRIAAN.

[*Later.*

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CHAPTER I

STEYN'S deep bass voice was heard in the passage:

"Come, Jack, come along, dog! Are you coming with your master?"

The terrier gave a loud, glad bark and came rushing madly down the stairs, till he seemed to be tumbling over his own paws.

"Oh, that voice of Steyn's!" Ottilie hissed between her teeth angrily and turned a number of pages of her novel.

Charles Pauws glanced at her quietly, with his little smile, his laugh at Mamma's ways. He was sitting with his mother after dinner, sipping his cup of coffee before going on to Elly.

Steyn went out with Jack; the evening silence settled upon the little house and the gas hummed in the impersonal and unhomely sitting-room. Charles Pauws looked down at the tips of his boots and admired their fit.

"Where has Steyn gone?" asked Mamma; and her voice grumbled uneasily.

"Gone for a walk with Jack," said Charles Pauws.

He was called Lot[1] at home; his voice sounded soft and soothing.

[1] Pronounced "Lo," as in the French "Charlot."

"He's gone to his woman!" snarled Ottilie.

Lot made a gesture of weariness:

"Come, Mamma," he said, "be calm now and don't think about that scene. I'm going on to Elly presently; meantime I want to sit cosily with you for a bit. Steyn's your husband, after all. You mustn't always be bickering with him and saying and thinking such things. You were just like a little fury again. It brings wrinkles, you know, losing your temper like that."

"I am an old woman."

"But you've still got a very soft little skin."

Ottilie smiled; and Lot stood up:

"There," he said, "give me a kiss. . . . Won't you? Must I give you one? You angry little Mummy! . . . And what was it about? About nothing. At least, I can't remember what it was all about. I should never be able to analyse it. And that's always the way. . . . How do I come to be so unruffled with such a little fury of a Mamma?"

"If you imagine that your father used to keep unruffled!"

Lot laughed that little laugh of his and did not reply. Mrs. Steyn de Weert went on reading more peacefully; she sat in front of her book like a child. She was a woman of sixty, but her blue eyes were like a child's, full of a soft beauty, gentle and innocent; and her voice, a little high-toned, always sounded like a child's, had just sounded like

the voice of a naughty child. Sitting, small and upright, in her chair, she read on, attentively, calming herself because Lot had spoken so calmly and kissed her so comfortingly. The gas hummed and Lot drank his coffee and, looking at his boots, wondered why he was going to be married. He did not think he was a marrying man. He was young still: thirty-eight; he really looked much younger; he made enough money with his articles to risk it, frugal-fashion, with what Elly would get from Grandpapa Takma; but all the same he did not think that he was of the marrying kind. His liberty, his independence, his selfish power to amuse himself as he pleased were what he loved best; and marrying meant giving one's self over, bound hand and foot, to a woman. He was not passionately in love with Elly: he thought her an intelligent, artistic little thing; and he was really not doing it for what she would inherit from Grandpapa Takma. Then why was he doing it, he asked himself, as he had asked himself day after day, during that week which had followed on his proposal.

"Mamma, can you tell me? Why did I propose to Elly?"

Ottilie looked up. She was accustomed to queer and humorous questions from Lot and she used to answer him in the same tone, as far as she was able; but this question made her feel a prick of jealousy, a prick that hurt very much, physically, like a thorn in the flesh.

"Why you proposed to Elly? I don't know. We always do things without knowing why."

Her voice sounded soft and melancholy, a little sulky after the naughty child's voice of just now. Had she not lost everything that she had ever possessed? Would she not lose Lot, have to part with him to Elly . . . as she had had to part with everything and everybody? . . .

"How seriously you answered, Mamma! That's not like you."

"Mayn't I be serious too, once in a way?"

"Why so sad and serious and tempersome lately? Is it because I am going to be married?"

"Perhaps."

"But you're fond of Elly . . ."

"Yes, she's very nice."

"The best thing we can do is to go on living together; Elly's fond of you too. I've talked to Steyn about it."

Lot called his step-father, his second step-father, Steyn, without anything else, after having called his first, when he was still a boy, "Mr." Trevelley. Ottilie had been married three times.

"The house is too small," said Mamma, "especially if you go having a family soon."

And yet she thought:

"If we remain together, I sha'n't lose Lot entirely; but I shall never be able to get on with my daughter-in-law, especially if there are children."

"A family?" he echoed.

"Children."

"Children?"

"Well, married people have had children before now!"

"Our family has lasted long enough. I shall be in no hurry about children."

"And, when your wife hasn't you with her, what has she, if she hasn't any children? It's true, you're both so clever. I'm only a stupid woman; my children have often been a comfort to me . . ."

"When you were able to spoil them."

"It's not for you to reproach me with that!"

"I'm not reproaching you."

"As to living together, Lot," said Mamma, sadly, in a child's coaxing voice, casting up her blue child-eyes, "*I* should be quite willing, if Elly is and if she promises to take things as she finds them. I shall feel very lonely without you. But, if there were any objections, I might go over to England. I have my two boys there. And Mary is coming home from India this year."

Lot knitted his brows and put his hand up to his fair hair: it was very neat, with a parting.

"Or else . . . I might go and look up Ottilie at Nice."

"No, Mamma, not that!" said Lot, almost angrily.

"Why not?" exclaimed Mrs. Steyn de Weert, raising her voice. "She's my child, surely?"

"Yes," Lot admitted, quickly recovering his composure. "But . . ."

"But what? Surely, my own child . . . ?"

"But it would be very silly of you to go to Ottilie."

"Why, even if we have quarrelled at times . . ."

"It would never do; you can't get on with her. If you go to Ottilie, I won't get married. Besides, Steyn has something to say in the matter."

"I'm so fond of Nice," said Mrs. Steyn de Weert; and her child-voice sounded almost plaintive. "The winters there are so delightful. . . . But perhaps it would be difficult for me . . . to go there . . . because Ottilie behaves so funnily. If it could be managed, I would rather live with you, Lot. If Elly is willing. Perhaps we could have a little larger house than this. Do you think we could afford it? Stay alone with Steyn I will *not*. That's settled. That's quite settled."

"Mummy darling . . ."

Lot's voice sounded full of pity. After her last determined words, Mamma had big tears in her blue child-eyes, tears which did not fall but which gave a sorrowful gleam to the naughty look in her face. Then, with a sudden short sigh, she took up her book and was silent and pretended to read. There was something resigned about her attitude and, at the same time, something obstinate, the constant attitude of a naughty child, a spoilt child that persisted in doing, quietly and silently, what it wanted to. Lot, with

his coffee-cup in his hand, his laugh about his mouth, studied Mamma; after his compassion, he just sat and studied her. Yes, she must have been very pretty; the uncles always said, a little doll. She was sixty now and no longer made any pretence to beauty; but she was still charming in a child-like and doll-like fashion. She had the wrinkles and the deeper furrows of an elderly woman; but the skin of her forehead and cheeks was still white and soft, without a blemish, tenderly veined at the temples. She had become very grey; but, as she had been very fair and her hair was soft and curly, it sometimes looked as if she had remained fair; and, simply though that hair appeared to be done, fastened up with one quick movement and pinned, there were still some almost childish little locks curling at the temples and in the neck. Her short, slim figure was almost that of a young woman; her hands were small and pretty; in fact, there was a prettiness about her whole person; and pretty above all were the young, blue eyes. Lot, who smiled as he looked at his mother, saw in her a woman over whom an emotional life, a life of love and hate, had passed without telling very much upon her. And yet Mamma had been through a good deal, with her three husbands, all three of whom she had loved, all three of whom, without exception, she now hated. A butterfly she had certainly been, but just an unthinking butterfly, simply because her nature was a butterfly's. She had loved much, but even a

deep passion would not have made her life or her different; naturally and unconsciously she was in headstrong opposition to everything. She had never been economical; and yet her house was never comfortable, nor had she ever spent much on dress, unconsciously despising elegance and comfort and feeling that she attracted through herself and not through any artistic surroundings. Mamma's get-up was like nothing on earth, Lot thought; the only cosy room in the house was his. Mamma, mad on reading, read very modern French novels, which she did not always understand, despite a life of love and hatred, having remained innocent in many things and totally ignorant of the darker phases of passion. Then Lot would see, while she was reading, that she was surprised and did not understand; a simple, childish wonder would come into her eyes; she never dared ask Lot for an explanation. . . .

Lot got up; he was going to Elly that evening. He kissed his mother, with his constant little laugh of silent amusement, his little laugh at Mamma.

"You never used to go out every evening," said Mamma, reproachfully; and she felt the thorn in her heart's flesh.

"I'm in love now," said Lot, calmly. "And engaged. And a fellow must go and see his girl, you know. . . . Will you think over my question, why I really proposed to Elly . . . and will you manage without me this evening?"

"I shall have to do that many evenings. . . ."

Mamma pretended to be absorbed in her French novel, but, as soon as Lot had left the room, she put down the book and looked round, vaguely, with a look of helplessness in her blue eyes. She did not move when the maid brought in the tea-tray and kettle; she sat staring before her, across her book. The water sang its bubbling song; outside the windows, after the last summer heat, the first cold wind blew with its wonted plaint. Ottilie felt herself abandoned: oh, how little of everything remained! There she was now, there she was, the old, grey-haired woman! What was there left of her life? And yet, strange to say, her three husbands were all three alive: Lot had been lately to Brussels with Elly, to see his father; Trevelley was spending a life of pleasure in London: when all was said, she had liked him the best. Her three English children lived in England, felt more English than Dutch; Ottilie was leading her curious, unconventional life at Nice: the whole family cried scandal about it; and Lot she was now about to lose. He had always stayed with her so nicely, though he went abroad pretty frequently; and he had hardly any friends at the Hague and never went to the Witte.[1] Now he was going to be married; he was no longer young, for a young man; he must be thirty-eight, surely? To occupy herself a little now, beside her lonely tea-tray and bubbling water, she began

[1] The Witte and the Plaats are the two leading clubs at the Hague.

to count her children's ages on her tiny fingers. Ottilie, Lot's sister, her eldest, forty-one: heavens, how old she was growing! The English ones, as she always called them—"my three English children"—Mary, thirty-five; John, thirty-two; even her handsome Hugh was thirty: heavens above, how old they were growing! And, once she was busy calculating ages, to amuse herself, she reckoned out that old Mamma would now soon be—let's see—yes, she would be ninety-seven. Old Mr. Takma, Elly's grandpapa, was only a year or two younger; and, when she thought of him, Ottilie reflected that it was very strange that Mr. Takma had always been so nice to her, as though it were really true what people used to whisper, formerly, when people still interested themselves in the family. So curious, those two old people: they saw each other almost every day; for Papa Takma was hale and still went out often, always walking the short distance from the Mauritskade to the Nassaulaan and crossing the razor-back bridge with rare vigour. Yes . . . and then Sister Thérèse, in Paris, eight years older than herself, must be sixty-eight; and the brothers: Daan, in India,[1] seventy; Harold, seventy-three; Anton, seventy-five; while Stefanie, the only child of Mamma's first marriage and the only De Laders, was getting on for seventy-seven. She, Ottilie, the youngest, felt that all those others were very old; and yet she was old too: she was sixty. It was all

[1] Dutch East Indies: Java.

a matter of comparison, growing old, different ages; but she had always felt it so: that she, the youngest, was comparatively young and always remained younger than the others, than all the others. She had to laugh, secretly, when Stefanie kept on saying:

"At our age . . ."

Why, Stefanie was seventy-seven! There was a difference—rather!—between sixty and seventy-seven. But she shrugged her shoulders: what did it matter? It was all over and so long ago. There she sat now, an old, grey-haired woman, and the aftermath of life dragged on and the loneliness increased daily, even though Steyn was here still: there he was, coming in. Where on earth did he go to every evening? She heard the fox-terrier barking in the passage and her husband's deep, bass voice:

"Hush, Jack! Quiet, Jack! . . ."

Oh, that voice, how she hated it!

What had she, whom had she left? She had five children, but only Lot with her; and he went abroad so often and was now going to be married: oh, how jealous it made her! Ottilie she never saw nowadays; Ottilie didn't care for her mother; she sang at concerts and had made a name for herself: she had a glorious voice; but she certainly behaved very strangely: Stefanie spoke of her as "lost." Mary was married, in India,[1] and her two English boys were in London: oh, how she sometimes longed for

[1] British India.

Hugh! Which of her children was any use or comfort to her, except that dear Lot? And Lot was going to be married and he was asking her, his mother, who would miss him so, why he was going to be married, why! Of course, he was only joking, really; but perhaps it was also serious in part. Did people ever know anything? . . . Did they know why they did a thing . . . in their impulsiveness. She had married three times. . . . Perhaps Ottilie was right after all? But no, there was the world, there were people, even though neither the world nor people had interested themselves in the family of late years; but still there they were; and you couldn't act as Ottilie did, without making yourself altogether impossible. That was why she, Mamma, had married, had married three times. Perhaps she ought never to have married at all: it would have been better for a heap of things, a heap of people. . . . The old life was all gone. It had vanished, as if it had never existed. And yet it had existed and, when it passed, had left much behind it, but nothing except melancholy ghosts and shadows. Yes, this evening she was in a serious mood and felt like thinking, a thing which otherwise she did as seldom as possible: what good did thinking do? When she had thought, in her life, she had never thought to any practical purpose. When she had yielded to impulse, things had been worse still. What was the good of wanting to live, when nevertheless your life was mapped out

for you by things stronger than yourself that slumbered in your blood?

Ottilie gave herself up to her French novel, for Steyn de Weert had entered the room, with Jack leaping in front of him. And any one who had seen Mamma a moment ago and saw her now would have noticed this phenomenon, that Mamma became much older as soon as her husband entered. The plump cheeks contracted nervously and the lines round the nose and mouth grew deeper. The little straight nose stuck out more sharply, the forehead frowned angrily. The fingers, which were tearing the pages of a novel anyhow with a hairpin, trembled; and the page was torn awry. The back became rounder, like that of a cat assuming the defensive. She said nothing, but poured out the tea.

"Coosh!" she said to the dog.

And, glad that the dog came to her, she patted him on the head with a half-caress; and the fox-terrier, giving a last sharp bark, spun round upon himself and, very suddenly, nestled down on Ottilie's skirt, with a deep sigh. Steyn de Weert, sitting opposite her, drank his tea. It appeared strange that they should be man and wife, for Mamma now certainly looked her age and Steyn seemed almost young. He was a tall fellow, broad-shouldered, not more than just fifty, with a handsome, fresh-coloured, healthy face, the face of a strong out-of-doors man, calm in glance and movement. The

fact that, years ago, he had thrown away his life, from a sense of honour, upon a woman much older than himself had afterwards inspired him with an indifference that ceased to reckon what might still be in store for him. What was spoilt was spoilt, squandered for good, irretrievably. There was the open air, which was cool and fresh; there was shooting; there was a drink, when he wanted one; there were his old friends, dating back to the time when he was an officer in the dragoons. Beyond these there were the little house and this old woman: he accepted them into the bargain, because it couldn't be helped. In externals he did, as far as possible, what she wanted, because she could be so tempersome and was so obstinate; but his cool stubbornness was a silent match for hers. Lot was a capital fellow, a little weak and unexpected and effeminate; but he was very fond of Lot: he was glad that Lot lived with them; he had given Lot one of the best rooms in the house to work in. For the rest . . . for the rest, there were other things; but they were no concern of anybody. Hang it all, he was a young man still, even though his thick hair was beginning to turn grey! His marriage had come about through a point of honour; but his wife was old, she was very old. The thing was really rather absurd. He would never make a hell of his life, as long as he still felt well and strong. With a good dose of indifference you can shake off everything.

It was this indifference of his which irritated his

wife, till she felt as nervous as a cat when he did no more than enter the room. He had not spoken a word, sat drinking his tea, reading the newspaper which he had brought with him. In the small living-room, where the gas hummed and the wind rattled the panes, the fox-terrier sometimes snorted in dreams that made him groan and moan on the trailing edge of his mistress' dress.

"Coosh!" she said.

And for the rest neither of them spoke, both sat reading, one her book, the other his evening-paper. And these two people, whose lives had been welded together by civil contract, because of the man's feelings of conventional honesty and his sense of not being able to act otherwise as a man of honour, these two had once, years ago, twenty years ago, longed passionately, the man for the woman and the woman for the man. When Steyn de Weert was a first lieutenant, a good-looking fellow, just turned thirty, he had met Mrs. Trevelley, without knowing her age. Besides, what did age matter when he set eyes upon a woman so ravishingly beautiful to his quick desire that he had at once, at the first moment that he saw her, felt the blood flaming in his veins and thought:

"That woman I must have! . . ."

At that time, though already forty, she was a woman so full of blossoming prettiness that she was still known as the beautiful Lietje. She was small, but perfect in shape and particularly charming in

feature, charming in the still very young lines of throat and breast, creamy white, with a few pale-gold freckles; charming with blue eyes of innocence and very fair, soft, wavy hair; charmingly half-woman and half-child, moulded for love, who seemed to exist only that she might rouse glowing desires. When Steyn de Weert saw her thus for the first time, in some ultra-modern Hague drawing-room of the Dutch-Indian set, she was married to her second husband, that half-Englishman, Trevelley, who was supposed to have made money in India; and Steyn had seen her the mother of three biggish children: a girl of fifteen and two boys a little younger; but the enamoured dragoon had refused to believe that, by her first marriage, with Pauws, from whom she had been divorced because of Trevelley, she had a daughter at the Conservatoire at Liège and a son of eighteen at home! The beautiful Lietje? She had married very young, in India, and she was still the beautiful Lietje. Such big children? Was that woman forty? The young officer had perhaps hesitated a moment, tried, now that he knew so much, to view Mrs. Trevelley with other eyes; but, when he looked in hers and saw that she desired him as he did her, he forgot everything. Why not cull a moment of happiness? What was an instant of love with a still seductive and beautiful woman? A triumph for a week, a month, a couple of months; and then each would go a different way.

That was how he had thought at the time; but now, now he was sitting here, because that bounder of a Trevelley, who wanted to get rid of Ottilie, had taken advantage of their relations to create a scandal and, after a pretence at a duel, to insist on a divorce; because all the Hague had talked about Ottilie, when she was left standing alone with a lover; and because he, Steyn, was an honest chap after all: that, that was why he was sitting here, with that old woman opposite him. Not a word was uttered between them; they drank their tea; the tray was removed; Jack dreamed and moaned; the wind howled. The pages followed in quick succession under Ottilie's fingers; and Steyn read the Manchurian war-news and the advertisements, the advertisements and the war-news. The room around them, married though they were, looked as it had always looked, impersonal and unhomely; the clock ticked on and on, under its glass shade. It looked like a waiting-room, that drawing-room: a waiting-room where, after many things that had passed, two people sat waiting. Sat waiting . . . for what? For the end that was so slow in coming, for the final death.

Steyn restrained himself and read through the advertisements once more. But his wife, suddenly shutting up her book, said, abruptly:

"Frans!"

"Eh?"

"I was talking to Lot just now."

"Yes . . . ."

"Would you object if they stayed on with us, he and Elly?"

"No, on the contrary."

But it seemed as though Steyn's calm consent just irritated his wife, perhaps against her own will, into contradiction:

"Yes, but it wouldn't be so easy!" she said.

"Why not?"

"The house is too small."

"We can move."

"A bigger house would be more expensive. Have you the money for it?"

"I think that, with what Lot makes and with Elly's allowance . . ."

"No, a bigger house is too dear."

"Well, then here. . . ."

"This is too small."

"Then it can't be done."

Ottilie rose, angrily:

"No, of course not: nothing can ever be done. Because of that wretched money. But I'll tell you this: when Lot is married, I can't . . . I c-can't . . ."

She stammered when she was angry.

"Well, what can't you?"

"I c-can't . . . stay alone with you! I shall go to Nice, to Ottilie."

"All right, go."

He said it calmly, with great indifference, and

took up his paper again. But it was enough to make Ottilie, who was highly strung, burst into sobs:

"You don't care a bit about me any more!"

Steyn shrugged his shoulders and went out of the room and upstairs; the dog sprang in front of him, barking.

Ottilie remained alone; and her sobs ceased at once. She knew it herself—the years had taught her as much as that—she easily lost her temper and would always remain a child. But, in that case, why grow older, in ever-increasing loneliness? There she sat, there she sat now, an old, grey woman, in that unhomely room; and everything was past. Oh, if Lot only remained with her, her Lot, her Charlot, her boy! And she felt her jealousy of Lot and Elly, at first restrained, rising more and more violently. And that other jealousy: her jealousy of Steyn. He irritated her when he merely entered the room; but she still remained jealous of him, as she always had been of every man that loved her. Oh, to think that he no longer cared about her, because she had grown old! Oh, to think that he never uttered a word of affection now, never gave her a kiss on her forehead! She was jealous of Elly because of Lot, she was jealous of Lot because of Steyn, because Steyn really cared more for Lot, nowadays, than for her! How cruel the years were, slowly to take everything from her! The years were past, the dear, laughing love-years, full of caresses; all that was past! Even the dog had just

gone off with Steyn: no living creature was nice to her; and why need Lot suddenly go getting married now? She felt so forlorn that, after the forced sobs, which she had stopped as soon as they were no longer necessary, she sank into a chair and wept softly, really weeping, this time, because no one loved her and because she was forlorn. Her still young and beautiful eyes, overflowing with tears, looked into the vanished past. Then—in the days when she was the beautiful Lietje—everything about her had been pleasant, nice, caressing, playful, jesting, almost adoring and entreating, because she was so pretty and gay and attractive and had an irresistible laugh and a temper full of the most delightful little whims. True, through all this there was always the sting of jealousy; but in those days so much of it had come her way: all the caressing homage which the world, the world of men, expends on a pretty woman! She laughed at it through her tears; and the memory meandered around her, bright as pretty little, distant clouds. Oh, what a wealth of adulation had surrounded her then! Now, all those men were old or dead; only her own three husbands were alive; and Steyn was still young. He was too young: if he had not been so young, she would have kept her charm for him longer and they would still be nice to each other, happy together as old people can be sometimes, even though the warmth of youth is past. . . . She heaved a deep sigh through her tears and sat in her chair like a

helpless child that has been naughty and now does not know what to do. What was there for her to do now? Just to go quietly to bed, in her lonely room, an old woman's room, in her lonely bed, and to wake in the morning and drag one more old day after the old, old days! Ah, why could she not have died while she was young?

She rang and told the maid to lock up; and these little habits had for her the disconsolateness of everyday repetition, because it all seemed unnecessary. Then she went upstairs. The little house was very tiny: a small suite of rooms on the ground-floor, above that a suite with a little dressing-room in addition to her room and Lot's, while Steyn had hoisted himself up to the attic floor, doubtless so as not to be too near his wife. And, as she undressed, she reflected that, if Elly would consent to make shift, it might just be possible: she would give up her present big room, with the three windows, to Lot and Elly; she, oh, she could sleep in what was now Lot's little room: what did she care? If only children did not come too quickly! Oh, if only she did not lose Lot altogether! He asked her why he had proposed to Elly! He asked it in his usual half-jesting way; but it was not nice of him to ask it: she was glad that she had answered quietly and not worked herself into a temper. Oh, the pain, the physical pain which she sometimes suffered from that thorn in her heart's flesh, because of love, affection, caresses even, that went out to

another! And sadly, pitying herself, she got into bed. The room was empty around her and unhomely: the bedroom of a woman who does not care for all the trifles of comfort and the vanities of the toilet and whose great joy always was to long for the love and caresses of those whom she found attractive, because of the once—often secret—wave of passion that flowed between them and her. For this she had neglected the whole of the other life of a wife, of a mother, even of a woman of the world and even of a smart woman, not caring for it, despising auxiliaries, feeling sure of her fascinations and very little of a mother by nature. Oh, she was old now and alone! And she lay lonely in her chilly bed; and that evening she had not even the consolation that Lot would come from the room next to hers to give her a good-night kiss in bed as he knew how, pettingly, a long, fond kiss on her forehead. At such times he would sit for a moment on the edge of her bed, have a last chat with her; and then, sometimes, passing his delicate hand over her cheek, he would say:

"Mamma, what a soft skin you have!"

When he came home now, he would think that she was asleep and would go to bed. She sighed: she felt so lonely. Above Lot's room—you could hear everything in that house—she heard Steyn pounding about. The maid also was going to bed now; out of her own bed Ottilie listened to all those sounds: doors opening; shoes put outside; a basin

emptied. It now became very still and she reflected what a good thing it was that she always chose old servants. She thought of it with a certain mischievous joy, glad that Steyn had no chance, with elderly servants. The house was now quiet for the night, though it was not yet eleven. . . .

Had she been asleep? Why did she wake suddenly? What was that creaking on the stairs? Was it Lot coming home? Or was it Steyn sneaking out again? Was it Lot? Was it Steyn? Her heart thumped in her chest. And she got out of bed quickly and, before she knew what she was doing, opened the door and saw a match struck flickering in the hall. . . .

"Is that you, Lot?"

"No, it's I."

"You, Frans?"

"Yes, what's the matter?"

His voice sounded irritated, because she had heard him.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going out."

"At this time of night?"

"Yes. I can't sleep. I'm going for a walk."

"You're going for a walk at this hour?"

"Yes."

"Frans, you're not faithful to me!"

"Oh, rot! Not faithful to you! Go back to bed."

"Frans, I *won't* have you go out."

"Look here!"

"Do stay at home, Frans! Lot isn't back yet and I'm frightened, alone. Do, Frans!"

Her voice sounded like that of a pleading child.

"I want some air."

"You want . . ."

She did not finish her sentence, suddenly choking with anger. On the top floor—she knew it—the old servant-maid was standing with her door ajar, laughing and grinning. She knew it. She felt stifled with rage, with nervous rage; she quivered all over her body, shivering in her night-dress. The hall-door had opened and shut. Steyn was outside; and she . . . she was still standing on the stairs above. She clenched her fists, she panted; she could have run after him, in her night-dress; the big tears sprang from her child-eyes; but, ashamed because of the maid, she went back to her room.

She cried, cried very softly, so as not to let the maid hear, so that the maid should not have that added enjoyment. Oh, that pain, that sting, here, in her heart, a physical pain, a physical pain! No one who did not feel it as she did could know the physical pain which it gave her, the sort of pain one describes to a doctor. Where could Steyn be going? He was still so young, he still looked so well-set-up. And yet he was her husband, her husband! Oh, why had he not remained nice to her, old though she was? She never even felt the touch of his hand now! And how at one time she

had felt that touch tingle through all her being! Oh, never again, never even a kiss, a kind kiss, such as old people still exchange at times!

She did not go to bed; she waited up. Would Steyn come back soon? Was that . . . was that he coming now? No, it was Lot: it was his key she heard, his lighter footstep.

And she opened the door:

"Lot!"

"Mummy, aren't you in bed yet?"

"No, dear. Lot, Lot, come here!"

He went into her room.

"Lot, Steyn is out."

"Out?"

"Yes, he went to his room first . . . and then I heard him go quietly down the stairs; then he went out of the hall-door, quietly."

"He didn't want to wake you, Mummy."

"Ah, but where has he gone to?"

"For a walk. He often does. It's very hot and close."

"Gone for a walk, Lot, gone for a walk? No, he's gone . . ."

She stood in front of him—he could see it by the candle-light—blazing with passion. Her little figure in the white night-dress was like that of a fury with the curly yellow hair, shot with grey, all shining; everything that was sweet in her seethed up into a raging temper, as though she were irritated to the utmost, and she felt an impulse suddenly to raise her

hand and box Lot's ears with its small, quivering fingers for daring to defend Steyn. She controlled herself and controlled her wrath, but words of vulgar invective and burning reproach came foaming to her trembling lips.

"Come, Mummy, Mummy! Come!"

Lot tried to calm her. And he took her in his arms and patted her back, as one does to an excited child:

"Come, Mummy, come!"

She now burst into sobs. But he remonstrated with her gently, said that she was exaggerating, that she had been overwrought lately, that he absolutely refused to get married if she did not become calmer; and very prettily he flirted with her in this way and persuaded her to go to bed, tucked her in, shook up her pillows:

"Come, Mummy, go to sleep now and don't be silly. Let Steyn go for his walk in peace, don't think of Steyn, don't think of anything. . . ."

She acquiesced, under the stroke of his delicate hand on her hair, her cheek.

"Will you go to sleep now, you silly Mummy? . . . I say, Mummy, what a soft skin you have! . . ."

CHAPTER II

ELLY TAKMA was very happy and looked better than she had done for a long time. Well, thought Cousin Adèle, who had long kept house for Grandpapa Takma—she was a Takma too and unmarried—well, a first little love-romance which a girl experiences when not much over twenty and which makes her feel unhappy, an engagement broken off with a fellow who used to go and see his mistress after spending the evening with his betrothed: a romance of that sort does not influence a girl's life; and, though Elly had moped for a while, Lot Pauws was making her happy and making her look better, with a glad laugh on her lips and a bright colour in her cheeks.

Cousin Adèle—Aunt Adèle, as Elly called her, Indian-fashion — buxom, full-figured, fresh and young-looking for her age, had nothing of a poor relation employed to do the housekeeping, but was altogether the capable mistress of the house, seeing to everything, caring for nothing but the details of her household and proud of her orderly home. She had never been in India and ruled Grandpapa's house with true Dutch conscientiousness, leaving Elly entirely to her hobby of the moment;

for Elly had her hobbies, which she rode until she attained absolute perfection, after which she would take up a fresh one. At eighteen, she had been a famous tennis-player, winning medals in tournaments, well-known for her exquisite, powerful and graceful play, mentioned in all the sporting-papers. After achieving perfection in tennis, she had suddenly grown bored with it, hung up her racket, studded round with the medals, by a pink ribbon in her bedroom and begun to work zealously for the Charity Organization Society, doing much practical slumming and sick-visiting; they thought highly of her in the committee. One day, however, when a sick man showed her his leg with a hole in it, she fainted and considered that she had overstepped her philanthropic limits. She resigned the work; and, feeling a certain handiness quivering at the tips of her sensitive fingers, she started making her own hats and also modelling. She was successful in both pursuits: the hats were so pretty that she thought seriously of setting up as a milliner and working for her living. The modelling too was most charming: after the first few lessons, she was modelling from the life; and her head of *A Beggar Boy* was accepted for exhibition. Then Elly had fallen in love and was very much in love; her engagement lasted three months; then it was broken off; and Elly, who did nothing by halves, for all her varying interests, had suffered a great deal and faded and pined and been dangerously ill, until one day she

recovered, with a feeling of melancholy as her only remembrance.

She was then twenty-three and had taken to writing. Under a pseudonym, she published her own engagement in the form of a short story: it was not a bad short story. Her new hobby brought her gradually into contact with Charles Pauws, who also wrote, mostly for the newspapers: articles, *causeries*. Elly was of opinion that she had soon reached her literary limits. After this short story, which had blossomed in her and blossomed out of her heart, she would never write anything more. She was twenty-three, she was old. She had lived her life, with different vicissitudes. Still there was something, there was Charles. Soft, weak, passably witty, with his mother's attractive eyes, with his fair hair carefully brushed, with his too pale blue ties, he was not the man of her dreams; and she still felt, sometimes very grievously, the sadness of her sorrow. But she was fond of him, she was very fond of him and she considered that he was wasting his talent on trivial work, on journalism, which he did with remarkable ease—after all, it was an art in itself, Charles would retort—whereas his two novels were so good; and he had attempted no serious work for the last ten years. And in this girl, with her thoroughness—within limits—there arose, on the now somewhat romantic ground of her melancholy and her sorrow, the mission to rouse Lot to work, to produce real work,

fine work. She must work no longer for herself but for another, for Lot, who possessed so many good qualities, but did not cultivate them earnestly. She saw more and more of him; she had him to tea; they talked,talked at great length; Lot, though not physically in love with her, thought it really pleasant to be with Elly, allowed himself to be stimulated, began a novel, stuck in the middle. She created in his mind the suggestion that he wanted her. And he proposed to her. She was very happy and he too, though they were not passionately in love. They were attracted by the prospect of being together, talking together, living, working, travelling together, in the smiling sympathy of their two souls: his a rather small, vain, cynical, artistic soul, with above all much kindly indulgence for others and a tinge of laughing bitterness and one great dread, which utterly swayed his soul, the dread of growing old; hers, at this moment, full of the serious thought of remaining true to her mission and giving her life a noble object by wrapping it up in another's.

Elly, that morning, was singing while the wind sent the early autumn leaves driving in a shower of golden sunlight along the window-panes. She was busy altering a winter hat, with a talent which she had not quite lost, when Cousin—Aunt—Adèle entered the room:

"Grandpapa has had a bad night; I kept on hearing him moving."

"Yes, then he's troubled with buzzings which are

just like voices," said Elly. "Grandpapa is always hearing those voices, you know. Dr. Thielens looks upon them as a premonitory symptom of total deafness. Poor Grandad! I'll go to him at once . . . I must just finish my hat first: I want to wear it to-day. We are going to old Mrs. Dercksz and to Aunt Stefanie. . . . Auntie, I am so happy. Lot is so nice. And he is so clever. I am certain that we shall be very happy. I want to travel a great deal. Lot loves travelling. . . . There is some talk of our living with Steyn and Ottilie. I don't know what to say. I would rather we were by ourselves. Still, I don't know. I'm very fond of Mamma; and she's Lot's mother after all. But I like harmony around me; and Steyn and she quarrel. I call him Steyn, simply. *Meneer* is too stiff; and I can't call him Papa. Besides, Lot calls him Steyn too. It's difficult, that sort of household. Steyn himself would think it odd if I called him Papa. . . . Do you like the hat like this? I'll alter yours to-morrow. Look, it's an absolutely new hat! . . . I'll go to Grandpapa now. Poor Grandad, so he's had a bad night? . . ."

She left the door open. Aunt Adèle looked round: the room was lumbered with hat-trimmings. The *Beggar Boy* smiled in a corner; the medals were studded round the racket, on its pink ribbon; the writing-table was tesselated with squares of note-paper.

"What a litter!" said Aunt Adèle.

She dared not touch the papers, though she would have liked to tidy them: she could not bear to see such a heap of scattered papers and she had to restrain her itching fingers. But she cleared up the hat-trimmings, quickly, and put them away in cardboard boxes. Then she went downstairs, where the maids were turning out the dining-room. Elly, flitting up the stairs, heard the blows beating on an arm-chair, felt them almost on her own back, ran still quicker up the stairs, to the next floor, where Grandpapa's room was. She stopped outside his door, recovered her breath, knocked, opened the door and went in with a calm step:

"How are you this morning, Grandad?"

The old gentleman sat at a knee-hole table, looking in a drawer; he locked it quietly when Elly entered. She went up and kissed him:

"I hear you did not sleep well?"

"No, child, I don't think I slept at all. But Grandad can do without sleep."

Grandpapa Takma was ninety-three: married late in life and his son married late made it possible for him to have a granddaughter of Elly's age. He looked younger, however, much younger, perhaps because he tactfully mingled a seeming indifference to his outward appearance with a really studied care. A thin garland of grey hair still fringed the ivory skull; the clean-shaven face was like a stained parchment, but the mouth, because of the artificial teeth, had retained its young and laughing outline and the eyes

were a clear brown, bright and even keen behind his spectacles. His figure was small, slender and slight as a young man's; and a very short jacket hung over his slightly-arched and emaciated back: it was open in front and hung in folds behind. The hands, too large in proportion to the man's short stature, but delicately veined and neatly kept, trembled incessantly; and there was a jerk in the muscles of the neck that twitched the head at intervals. His tone was cheerful and lively, a little too genial not to be forced; and the words came slowly and well-weighed, however simple the things which they expressed. When he sat, he sat upright, on an ordinary chair, never huddled together, as though he were always on his guard; when he walked, he walked briskly, with very short steps of his stiff legs, so as not to betray their rheumatism. He had been an Indian civil servant, ending as a member of the Indian Council, and had been pensioned years ago; his conversation showed that he kept pace with politics, kept pace with colonial matters: he laughed at them, with mild irony. In his intercourse with others, who were always his juniors—for he had no contemporaries save old Mrs. Dercksz, *née* Dillenhof, who was ninety-seven, and Dr. Roelofsz, eighty-eight—in his intercourse he was kindly and condescending, realizing that the world must seem other to people even of sixty and seventy than it did to him; but the geniality was too great, was sometimes too exuberant not to be assumed and not

to make people feel that he never thought as he spoke. He gave the impression of being a diplomatist who, himself always on his guard, was sounding another to find out what he knew. Sometimes, in his bright eyes, a spark shone behind the spectacles, as though he had suddenly been struck by something, a very acute perception; and the jerk of the neck would throw his head on one side, as though he suddenly heard something. His mouth would then distort itself into a laugh and he would hurriedly agree with whomever he was addressing.

What was most striking in him was that quick, tremulous lucidity in so very old a man. It was as though some strange capacity had sharpened his senses so that they remained sound and serviceable, for he still read a great deal, with glasses; he was sharp of hearing; he was particular in the matter of wine, with an unimpaired sense of smell; he could find things in the dark. Only, sometimes, in the midst of a conversation, it was as though an invincible drowsiness overcame him; and his eyes would suddenly stare glassily in front of him and he would fall asleep. They left him alone and had the civility not to let him know it; and, five minutes later, he would wake up, go on talking, oblivious of that momentary unconsciousness. The inward shock with which he had woke was visible to no one.

Elly went to see her grandfather in the morning, always for a minute.

"We are going to pay calls this afternoon," said

Elly. "On the family. We have been nowhere yet."

"Not even to Grandmamma."

"We shall go to her first this afternoon. Grandad, we've been engaged three days. And you can't go troubling everybody with your happiness immediately."

"And you *are* happy, child," Grandpapa began, genially.

"I think so. . . ."

"I'm sorry I can't keep you with me, you and Lot," he continued, lightly: he sometimes had an airy way of treating serious topics; and his thin voice then lacked emphasis. "But you see, I'm too old for that: a young household grafted on mine! Besides, to live by yourselves is more charming. . . . Baby, we never talk of money, you and I. As you know, Papa left nothing and he ran through your mother's money, lost it in different businesses in Java; they none of them succeeded. Your poor parents never had any luck. Well, Baby, I'm not a rich man, but I can live like this, on my Mauritskade, because an old man doesn't want much and Aunt Adèle manages things so cleverly. I've worked out that I can give you two hundred guilders a month. But that's all, child, that's all."

"But, Grandad, it's really very handsome. . . ."

"Well, you can accept it from your grandfather. You're my heiress, after all, though you're not all

alone; no, Grandfather has others: kind acquaintances, good friends. . . . It won't last very long now, child. You won't be rich, for my house is my only luxury. All the rest, as you know, is on an economical scale. But you will have enough, especially later on; and Lot appears to make a good bit. Oh, it's not money that matters to him, child: what matters to him is . . . is . . ."

"What, Grandad?"

A drowsiness suddenly overcame the old man. But, in a few minutes, he resumed:

"There is some talk of your living with Steyn. . . ."

"Yes, but nothing's decided."

"Ottilie is nice, but hot-tempered," said the old gentleman, sunk in thought: he seemed to be thinking of other things, of more important things especially.

"If I do, it will be for Mamma's sake, Grandad, because she is so much attached to Lot. I would rather have my own little house. But we shall travel a good deal in any case. Lot says that he can travel cheaply."

"You might be able to do it, child, with a little tact: live with the Steyns, I mean. Ottilie is certainly very much alone, poor thing. Who knows? Perhaps you would supply a little affection, a little sympathy. . . ."

His airy voice became softer, fuller, sounded more earnest.

"We shall see, Grandpapa. Will you stay upstairs, or are you coming down to lunch?"

"No, send me something up here. I've not much appetite, I've no appetite. . . ."

His voice sounded airy again, like the whisper of a breeze.

"It's windy weather; and I think it's going to rain. Are you going out all the same, this afternoon?"

"For a moment, I think. . . . To Mrs. Dercksz' . . ."

"To Grandmamma's. . . ."

"Yes, yes, better say Grandmamma. When you see her, call her Grandmamma at once. It's less stiff: she will like it . . . even though you're not married to Lot yet. . . ."

His voice sank; he sighed, as though he were thinking of other things, of more important things; and, with the jerk in his neck, he started up and remained like that for a second, with his head on one side, as if he heard something, as if he were listening. Elly did not think Grandpapa looking well to-day. The drowsiness overcame him again; his head dropped and his eyes grew glassy. And he sat there, so frail and fragile, as if one could have blown the life out of him like a dancing feather. Elly, after a moment's hesitation, left him alone. The old gentleman gave a start, when he heard the door close gently, and recovered his full consciousness. He sat for a second or two without moving. Then

he unlocked the drawer of his writing-table, with which he had been busy before, and took out the pieces of a letter that had already been torn up. He tore the pieces still smaller, as small as they possibly could be, and scattered them in his waste-paper-basket, in among other discarded papers. After that he tore up a second letter, after that a third, without reading them over. He scattered the tiny pieces in the basket and shook the basket, shook the basket. The tearing tired his stiff fingers; the shaking tired his arm.

"A few more this afternoon," he muttered. "It's getting time, it's getting time. . . ."

CHAPTER III

THE old gentleman went out at about three o'clock, alone: he did not like to be accompanied when he went, though he was glad to be brought back home; but he would never ask for this service. Aunt Adèle looked out of the window and followed him with her eyes as he turned by the barracks and crossed the razor-back bridge. He was not going farther than just down the Nassaulaan, to Mrs. Dercksz'; and he managed the distance with a delicate, erect figure and straight legs: he did not even look so very old a man, in his overcoat buttoned up to the throat, even though each step was carefully considered and supported by his heavy, ivory-knobbed stick. In order above all not to let it be perceived that this short walk was his exercise and his relaxation, a great deal of exercise and relaxation for his now merely nervous strength, he had needs to consider every step; but he succeeded in walking as though without difficulty, stiff and upright, and he studied his reflection in the plate-glass of the ground-floor windows. In the street, he did not strike a passer-by as so very old. When he rang, old Anna hurried and the cat slipped cross-wise through her petticoats, cat and maid making for the front-door at one run:

"The old gentleman, I expect."

Then she drove the cat back to the kitchen, afraid lest the old gentleman should stumble, and drew him in with little remarks about the weather and questions about his health; and to Takma it called for rare art to let his overcoat, which he took off in the hall, slip from his shoulders and arms into the maid's hands. He did it slowly and gradually, a little tired with the walk, but in the meanwhile he recovered breath sufficiently to go upstairs, one flight only, with the aid of the stick—"We may as well keep the stick, Anna," he would say—for Mrs. Dercksz nowadays never came down to the ground-floor rooms.

She was expecting him.

He came almost every day; and, when he was not coming, Aunt Adèle or Elly would call round to say so. So she sat, in her high-backed chair, waiting for him. She sat at the window, looking out at the gardens of the villas in the Sofialaan.

He murmured heartily, though his salutation was indistinct:

"Well, Ottilie? . . . It's blowing out of doors. . . . Yes, you've been coughing a bit lately. . . . You must take care of yourself, you know. . . . I'm all right, I'm all right, as you see. . . ."

With a few more words of genial heartiness, he sat down straight upright in the arm-chair at the other window, while Anna now for the first time

relieved him of his hat, and rested his hands, still clad in the wide, creased gloves of *glacé* kid, on his stick.

"I haven't seen you since the great news," said Mrs. Dercksz.

"The children are coming presently to pay their visit of inspection. . . ."

They were both silent, their eyes looking into each other's eyes, chary of words. And quietly for a while they sat opposite each other, each at a window of the narrow drawing-room. The old, old woman sat in a twilight of crimson-rep curtains and cream-coloured lace-and-canvas blinds, in addition to a crimson-plush valance, which kept out the draught and hung with a bend along the window-frame. She had only moved just to raise her thin hand, in its black mitten, for Takma to press. Now they both sat as though waiting for something and yet pleased to be waiting together. . . . The old lady was ninety-seven and she knew that what she was waiting for must come before her hundredth year had dawned. . . . In the twilight of that curtained corner, against the sombre wall-paper, her face seemed almost like a piece of white porcelain, with wrinkles for the crackle, in that shadow into which she still withdrew, continuing a former prudent habit of not showing too much of her impaired complexion; and her wig was glossy-black, surmounted with the little black-lace cap; the loose black dress fell in easy, thin lines around her almost

brittle, lean figure, but hid her so entirely in those never-varying folds of supple cashmere that she could never be really seen or known, but only suggested in that dark drapery. Besides the face, nothing else seemed alive but the frail fingers trembling in her lap, like so many tapering, luminous wands in their black mittens; the wrists were encircled in close-fitting woollen cuffs. She sat upright on her high-backed chair, as on a throne, supported by a stiff, hard cushion; another cushion was under her feet, which she never showed, as they were slightly deformed by gout. Beside her, on a little table, was some crochet-work, untouched for years, and the newspapers, which were read to her by a companion, an elderly lady who withdrew as soon as Mr. Takma arrived. The room was neat and simple, with a few framed photographs here and there as the only ornament amid the highly-polished, black, shiny furniture, the crimson sofa and chairs, with a few pieces of china gleaming in a glass cabinet. The closed folding-doors led to the bedroom: these were the only two rooms inhabited by the old woman, who took her light meal in her chair.

Golden-sunny was the late summer day; and the wind blew gaily, in a whirl of early yellow leaves, through the garden of the Sofialaan.

"A nice view, that," said Mrs. Dercksz, as she had said so often before, with her mittened hand just hinting at an angular pointing gesture.

The voice, long cracked, sounded softer than pure Dutch and was mellower, with its creole accent; and, now that she looked out of the window, the eyes also took on an eastern softness in the porcelain features and became darker. She did not clearly distinguish things outside; but yet the knowledge that there were flowers and trees over the way was dear to her dim eyes.

"Fine asters in the garden opposite," said Takma.

"Yes," Mrs. Dercksz assented, unable to see them, but now knowing about the asters.

She understood him quite well; her general deafness she concealed by never asking what was said and by replying with a smile of her thin, closed lips or a movement of her head.

After a pause, as each sat looking out of his own window, she said:

"I saw Ottilie yesterday."

The old gentleman felt bewildered for a moment:

"Ottilie?" he asked.

"Lietje . . . my daughter. . . ."

"Oh, yes! . . . You saw Lietje yesterday. . . . I thought you were speaking of yourself. . . ."

"She was crying."

"Why?"

"Because Lot is going to be married."

"She'll be very lonely, poor Lietje; yet Steyn is a decent fellow. . . . It's a pity. . . . I like Steyn. . . ."

"We are all of us lonely," said Mrs. Dercksz; and the cracked voice sounded sad, as though she were regretting a past full of vanished shades.

"Not all of us, Ottilie," said Takma. "You and I have each other. We have always had each other. . . . Our child, when Lot is married, will have no one, not even her own husband."

"Ssh!" said the old woman; and the straight, lean figure gave a shiver of terror in the twilight.

"There's no one here; we can speak at our ease."

"No, there's no one. . . ."

"Did you think there was some one?"

"No, not now. . . . Sometimes . . ."

"Yes?"

"Sometimes . . . you know . . . I think there is."

"There's no one."

"No, there's no one."

"Why are you afraid?"

"Afraid? Am I afraid? What should I be afraid of? I am too old . . . much too old . . . to be afraid now. . . . Even though *he* may stand over there."

"Ottilie!"

"Ssh!"

"There's no one."

"No."

"Have you . . . have you seen *him* lately?"

"No. . . . No. . . . Not for months, perhaps not . . . for years, for years. . . . But

I did see him for many, many years. . . . You never saw him?"

"No."

"But . . . you used to *hear* him? . . ."

"Yes, *I* . . . I used to *hear* him . . . My hearing was very good and always keen. . . . It was hallucinations. . . . I often heard his voice. . . . Don't let us talk about it . . . We are both so old, so old, Ottilie. . . . He *must* have forgiven us by now. Else we should never have grown so old. Our life has passed peacefully for years: long, long, old years; nothing has ever disturbed us: he *must* have forgiven us. . . . *Now* we are both standing on the brink of our graves."

"Yes, it will soon come. I feel it."

But Takma brought his geniality into play:

"You, Ottilie? You'll live to be a hundred!"

His voice made an effort at bluff braggadocio and then broke into a shrill high note.

"I shall never see a hundred," said the old woman. "No. I shall die this winter."

"This winter?"

"Yes. I foresee it. I am waiting. But I am frightened."

"Of death?"

"Not of death. But . . . of *him!*"

"Do you believe . . . that you will see him again?"

"Yes. I believe in God, in the communion of souls. In a life hereafter. In atonement."

"I don't believe in an atonement hereafter, because we have both of us suffered so much in our lives, Ottilie!"

The old man's tone was almost one of entreaty.

"But there has been no punishment," said she.

"Our suffering was a punishment."

"Not enough. I believe that, when I am dead, he, *he* will accuse me."

"Ottilie, we have become so old, quietly, quietly. We have only had to suffer inwardly. But that has been enough, God will consider that punishment enough. Don't be afraid of death."

"I should not be afraid if I had seen his face wearing a gentler expression, with something of forgiveness. He always stared at me. . . . Oh, those eyes! . . ."

"Hush, Ottilie! . . ."

"When I sat here, he would stand there, in the corner by the cabinet, and look at me. When I was in bed, he appeared in my mirror and gazed at me. For years and years. . . . Perhaps it was an hallucination. . . . But I grew old like that. I have no tears left. I no longer wring my hands. I never move except between this chair and my bed. I have had no uneasiness . . . or terror . . . for years: *nobody knows.* Of the *baboe*[1] . . ."

"Ma-Boeten?"

"Yes . . . I have had no news for years. She

[1] Malay: nurse, *ayah.*

was the only one who knew. She's dead, I expect."

"Roelofsz knows," said the old gentleman, very softly.

"Yes . . . he knows . . . but . . ."

"Oh, he has always kept silent! . . ."

"He is . . . *almost* . . . an accomplice. . . ."

"Ottilie, you must think about it calmly. . . . We have grown so very old . . . You must think about it calmly, as *I* think about it. . . . You have always been too fanciful . . ."

His voice sounded in entreaty, very different from its usual airy geniality.

"It was after that in particular that I became full of fancies. No, I have never been able to think about it calmly! At first I was afraid of people, then of myself: I thought I should go mad! . . . Now, now that it is approaching . . . I am afraid of God!"

"Ottilie!"

"It has been a long, long, long martyrdom. . . . O God, can it be that this life is not enough?"

"Ottilie, we should not have grown so very old—you . . . and I . . . and Roelofsz—if God . . . and *he* also had not forgiven us."

"Then why did he so often . . . come and stand there! Oh, he stood there so often! He just stared, pale, with dark, sunken eyes, eyes like two fiery daggers: like *that!* . . ."

And she pointed the two slender, wand-like forefingers straight in front of her.

"I . . . I am calm, Ottilie. And, if we are punished afterwards, after our death, we must endure it. And, if we endure it . . . we shall receive mercy."

"I wish I were a Catholic. I thought for a long time of becoming a Catholic. Thérèse was quite right to become a Catholic. . . . Oh, why do I never see her now? Shall I ever see her again? I hope so. I hope so. . . . If I had been a Catholic, I should have confessed . . ."

"There is no absolution among Catholics for *that*."

"Isn't there? I thought . . . I thought that a priest could forgive anything . . . and cleanse the soul before you died. The priest at any rate could have consoled me, could have given me hope! Our religion is so cold. I have never been able to speak of it to a clergyman. . . ."

"No, no, of course not!"

"I could have spoken of it to a priest. He would have made me do penance all my life long; and it would have relieved me. Now, *that* is always here, on my breast. And I am so old. I sit with it. I lie in bed with it. I cannot even walk about with it, roam about with it, forget myself in movement. . . ."

"Ottilie, why are you talking about it so much to-day? Sometimes we do not mention it for

months, for years at a time. Then the months and years pass quietly. . . . Why are you suddenly talking so very much about it to-day?"

"I began thinking, because Lot and Elly are getting married."

"They will be happy."

"But isn't it a crime, a crime against nature?"

"No, Ottilie, do reflect . . ."

"They are . . ."

"They are cousins. They don't know it, but that isn't a crime against nature!"

"True."

"They are cousins."

"Yes, they're cousins."

"Ottilie is my daughter; her son is my grandson. Elly's father . . ."

"Well?"

"Do reflect, Otillie: Elly's father, my son, was Lietje's brother. Their children are first cousins."

"Yes."

"That's all they are."

"But they don't know that they are cousins. Lietje has never been told that she is your daughter. She has never been told that she was your son's sister."

"What difference does that make? Cousins are free to marry."

"Yes, but it's not advisable. . . . It's not advisable because of the children that may come,

because of the blood and because . . . because of everything."

"Of what, Ottilie?"

"They inherit our past. They inherit that terror. They inherit our sin. They inherit the punishment for our offence."

"You exaggerate, Ottilie. No, they don't inherit as much as that."

"They inherit everything. One day perhaps they will see *him* standing, perhaps they will hear him, in the new houses where they will live. . . . It would have been better if Elly and Lot had found their happiness apart from each other . . . in other blood, in other souls. . . . They will never be able to find the ordinary happiness. Who knows, perhaps their children will be . . ."

"Hush, Ottilie, hush!"

"Criminals. . . ."

"Ottilie, please be quiet! Oh, be quiet! Why do you speak like that? For years, it has been so peaceful. You see, Ottilie, we are *too* old. We have been allowed to grow so old. We have had our punishment. Oh, don't let us speak about it again, never again! Let us wait calmly, calmly, and suffer the things that come after us, for we cannot alter them."

"Yes, let us wait calmly."

"Let us wait. It will come soon. It will come soon, for you and me."

His voice had sounded imploringly; his eyes shone

wet with terror. She sat stiff and upright in her chair; her fingers trembled violently in the deep, black folds of her lap. But a lethargy descended upon both of them; the strange lucidity and the anxious tension of their unaccustomed words seemed but for a moment to be able to galvanize their old souls, as though by a suggestion from without. Now they both grew lethargic and became very old indeed. For a long time they stared, each at his window, without words.

Then there was a ring at the front-door.

CHAPTER IV

It was Anton Dercksz, the old lady's eldest son by her second marriage; by her first she had only an unmarried daughter, Stefanie de Laders. Anton also had never married; he had made his career in Java; he was an ex-resident. He was seventy-five, taciturn, gloomy and self-centred, owing to his long, lonely life, full of lonely thoughts about himself, the heady thoughts of a sensualist who, in his old age, had lapsed into a sensualist in imagination. . . . It had been his nature, first instinctively, then in a more studied fashion, to hide himself, not to give himself; not to give of himself even that which would have won him the praise and esteem of his fellow-men. Endowed with intelligence above the ordinary, a student, a man of learning, he had fostered that intelligence only for himself and had never been more than an average official. His self-centred, gloomy soul had demanded and still demanded solitary enjoyments, even as his powerful body had craved for obscure pleasures.

He entered in his overcoat, which he kept closely wrapped about him, feeling chilly, though it was still a sunny September and autumn had hardly given its first shiver. He came to see his mother once a week, from an old habit of respect and awe. Her

children—elderly men and women, all of them—all called regularly, but first asked Anna, the maid, with the cat always among her skirts, who was upstairs with Mamma. If some member of the family were there already, they did not go up at once, anxious on no account to tire her with too great a gathering and too many voices. Then Anna would receive them in the downstair morning-room, where she kept up a fire in the winter, and often the old servant would offer the visitor a brandy-cherry. If old Mr. Takma had only just arrived, Anna did not fail to say so; and the children or grandchildren would wait downstairs for a quarter of an hour and longer, because they knew that Mamma, that Grandmamma liked to be alone for a while with Takma, her old friend. If Takma had been there some time, Anna would reckon out whether she could let them go upstairs at once. . . . The companion was not there in the afternoons, except when mevrouw sent for her, as sometimes happened when the weather was bad and nobody called.

Anton Dercksz entered, hesitating because of Takma, uncertain whether he was intruding. The old woman's children, however much advanced in years, continued to behave as children to the once stern and severe mother, whom they still saw in the authority of her motherhood. And Anton in particular always saw her like that, seated in that chair which was as an unyielding throne, strange in that very last and fragile life hanging from a

brittle, invisible thread, which, in snapping, would have broken life's last string. At the window, because of a lingering ray of sunshine outside, the mother sat in a crimson twilight of curtains and valance, sat as if she would never move again until the moment came for the dark portals to open. For the "children" did not see her move, save with the single, angular gesture sometimes suggested by once active, but now gouty, slender, wand-like fingers. Anton Dercksz knew that—if the portals had not opened that day—his mother would move, round about eight o'clock, to be taken to bed by Anna and the companion. But he never saw this: what he saw was the well-nigh complete immobility of the brittle figure in the chair that was almost a throne, amid a twilight just touched with pink. Old man as he himself was, he was impressed by this. His mother sat there so strangely, so unreally: she sat waiting, waiting. Her eyes, already glazed, stared before her, sometimes as though she were afraid of something. . . . The lonely man had developed within himself an acute gift of observation, a quick talent for drawing inferences, which he never allowed any one to perceive. For years he had held the theory that his mother was always thinking of something, always thinking of *something,* an invariable something. What could it be? . . . Perhaps he was mistaken, perhaps he looked too far, perhaps his mother's expression was but the staring of almost sightless eyes. Or was she think-

ing of hidden things in her life, things sunk in her life as in a deep, deep pool? Had she her secrets, as he had his, the secrets of his sullen hedonism? He was not inquisitive: everybody had his secrets; perhaps Mother had hers. He would never strive to find out. People had always said that Takma and Mother had been lovers: she no doubt thought of those old things . . . or was she not thinking, was she merely waiting and staring out of her window? . . . However this might be, his awe remained unchanged.

"It is lovely weather, for September," he said, after the usual greetings.

He was a big man, broad in his overcoat, with a massive florid face, in which deep folds hung beside the big nose and made dewlaps under the cheeks; the grey-yellow moustache bristled above a sensual mouth with thick, purple lips, which parted over the yellow teeth, crumbling, but still firm in their gums; the thick beard, however recently shaved, still left a black stubble on the cheeks; and a deep scar cleft the twice deeply-wrinkled forehead, which rose towards a thinning tuft of yellow-grey hair, with the head bald at the back of it. The skin of his neck was rough, above the low, stand-up collar, and grooved, though not quite so deeply, like that of an old labourer, with deep-ploughed furrows. His coarse-fisted hands lay like clods on his thick knees; and a watch-chain, with big trinkets, hung slackly over his great stomach, which had forced open a

button of his worn and shiny waistcoat. His feet rested firmly on the carpet in their Wellington boots, whose tops showed round under the trouser-legs. This outward appearance betrayed only a rough, sensual, elderly man: it showed him neither in his intellect nor, above all, in his power of imagination. The great dream-actor that he was remained hidden from whoever saw him no otherwise than thus.

Takma, so many years older, with his habit of gaiety and his sometimes shrill heartiness, which gave a birdlike sound to his old voice and a factitious glitter to his false teeth, Takma, in his short, loose jacket, had something delicate beside Anton Dercksz, something younger and more restless, together with a certain kindly, gentle, benevolent comprehension, as if he, the very old man, understood the whole life of the younger one. But this was just what always infuriated Anton with Takma, because he, Anton Dercksz, saw through it. It concealed something: Takma hid a secret, though he hid it in a different way from Anton Dercksz'. He hid a secret: when he started, with that jerk of his head, he was afraid that he had been seen through. . . . Well, Anton was not inquisitive. But this very old man, this former lover of his mother, of the woman who still filled Anton with awe when he saw her sitting erect, waiting, in her chair by the window: this old man annoyed him, irritated him, had always roused his dislike. He had never allowed it to show and Takma had never perceived it.

The three old people sat without exchanging many words, in the narrow drawing-room. The old woman had now calmly mastered herself, because her son, her "child," was sitting there and she had always remained calm before the splenetic glance of his slightly prominent eyes. Straight up she sat, as though enthroned, as though she were a sovereign by reason of her age and her authority, dignified and blameless, but so frail and fragile, as though the aura of death would presently blow away her soul. Her few words sounded a note of appreciation that her son had come to see her, asking, as was his filial duty, once a week, after her health. She was pleased at this; and it was not difficult for her to calm herself, suddenly put in a placid mood by that feeling of satisfaction, even though but now, as in a suggestion from without, she had been obliged to speak of former things which she had seen pass before her eyes. And, when the bell rang again, she said:

"That's the children, I expect. . . ."

They all three listened, in silence. Sharp-eared old Takma heard some one speaking to Anna in the hall:

"They're asking if it won't be too much for you," said Takma.

"Anton, call down the stairs to have them shown up," said the old lady; and her voice rang like a maternal command.

Anton Dercksz rose, went to the door and called out:

"You can come up. Grandmamma's expecting you."

Lot and Elly came in and their entrance was as though they feared to dispel the atmosphere around the old woman with the too-great youthfulness approaching her. But the old woman made an angular movement of her arms, which lifted themselves in the black folds of the wide sleeves; and a hint of the gesture was given, gouty-stiff, in the crimson shade of the curtains, while she said:

"So you're going to get married; that's right."

The gesture brought the mittened hands to the level of Lot's head, which she held for a moment and kissed with a trembling mouth; she kissed Elly too; and the girl said, prettily:

"Grandmamma. . . ."

"I am glad to see you both. Mamma has already told me the great news. Be happy, children, *happy*. . . ."

The words sounded like a short speech from out of the twilight of the throne-like chair, but they trembled, breaking with emotion:

"Be happy, children, *happy*," Mamma had said.

And Anton Dercksz seemed to see that his mother was thinking that there had not been many happy marriages in the family. He was conscious of the underlying thought in her words and was glad that he had never been married: it gave him a silent,

pleasurable sense of satisfaction, as he looked at Lot and Elly. They were sitting there so youthful and unwrung, he thought; but he knew that this was only on the surface, that Lot, after all, was thirty-eight and that this was not Elly's first engagement. Yet how young those two lives were and how many vigorous years had they not before them! He became jealous at the thought and envious; and his eyes grew sullen when he reflected that vigorous years were no longer his. And, with the sly glance of a man secretly enjoying the sensual pleasures of the imagination, he asked himself whether Lot was really a fellow who ought to think of marrying. Lot was delicately built, was hardly a man of flesh and blood, was like his mother in appearance, with his pink face and his fair plastered hair, his short fair moustache above his cynical upper lip, and very spruce in his smooth-fitting jacket and the neat little butterfly tie beneath his double collar. And yet no fool, thought Anton Dercksz: his articles written from Italy, on Renascence subjects, were very good and Anton had read them with pleasure, without ever complimenting Lot upon them; and his two novels were excellent: one about the Hague, one about Java, with a keen insight into Dutch-Indian society. There was a great deal in the lad, more than one would think, for he looked not a man of flesh and blood, but a fair-haired, finikin doll, a fashion-plate.

Elly was not pretty, had a pale but sensible little

face: he did not believe that she was a woman of warm passion, or, if she was, it would not reveal itself till later. He did not expect that they would kiss each other very rapturously; and yet that was the most genuine consolation in this confounded life of ours, always had been so to him. Everything grew confused before his jaundiced eyes, in a regret for things that were lost; but nevertheless he listened to the conversation, which was carried on calmly and quietly, in order not to tire Grandmamma: when Lot and Elly meant to get married, where they would go for the honeymoon.

"We shall be married in three months," said Lot. "There's nothing to wait for. We shall go to Paris and on to Italy. I know Italy well and can show Elly about. . . ."

Anton Dercksz rose and took his leave; and, when he went downstairs, he found his sister, Ottilie Steyn de Weert, and Roelofsz, the old doctor, in the morning-room:

"The children are upstairs," he said.

"Yes, I know, said Ottilie. "That's why I'm waiting; it would be too much for Mamma otherwise . . ."

"Well-well-well," muttered the old doctor.

He sat huddled in a chair, a shapeless mass of dropsical obesity: his one stiff leg was stuck out straight in front of him and his paunch hung sideways over it in curving lines; his face, clean-shaven but bunched into wrinkles, was like the face of a

very old monk; his thin grey hair looked as if it were moth-eaten and hung in frayed wisps from his skull, which was shaped like a globe, with a vein at one temple meandering in high relief; he lisped and muttered exclamation upon exclamation; his watery eyes swam behind gold spectacles.

"Well-well-well, Ottilie, so your Lot is getting married at last! . . ."

He was eighty-eight, the doctor, the last surviving contemporary of Grandmamma and Mr. Takma; he had brought Ottilie Steyn into the world, in Java, at a time when he was a young doctor, not long since arrived from Holland; and he called her either by her Christian name or "child."

"At last?" cried Ottilie, in a vexed tone. "It's early enough for *me!*"

"Yes-yes-yes, yes-yes, child; you'll miss him, you'll miss your boy, I daresay. . . . Still, they'll make a nice couple, he and Elly, well-well, yes-yes-yes, working together, artistic, yes, well. . . . That good old Anna hasn't started her fires yet! This room's warm, but upstairs, yes-yes, it's very chilly. . . . Takma's always blazing hot inside, eh-eh? Well-well! Mamma likes a cool room too; well-well, cool: cold, *I* call it. I consider it warmer in here: ay-ay, it *is* warmer down here. Well-well! . . . Mamma wasn't so well, child, yesterday. . . ."

"Come, doctor," said Anton Dercksz, "you'll make Mamma see a hundred yet!"

And he buttoned up his coat and went away, satisfied at having performed his filial duty for that week.

"Oh-oh-oh!" cried the doctor; but Anton was gone. "A hundred! A hundred! Oh-dear-no, oh-dear-no, tut-tut! No, *I* can do nothing, *I* can do nothing. I'm old myself, yes-yes, I'm old: eightee-eight years old, eightee-eight, Lietje! . . . Yes-yes, that counts, yes-yes. . . . No, *I* can do nothing more, what do you say? And it's a good thing that Mamma's got Dr. Thielens: he's young, ay-ay, he's young. . . . Here come the children! Well-well!" the doctor continued, by way of greeting. "Best congratulations, ay-ay, very nice! Art, eh, art for art's sake? . . . Is Granny better to-day? Then I'll just go upstairs, yes-yes, well-well! . . ."

"Where are you going now, children?" asked Mamma Ottilie.

"To Aunt Stefanie's," said Elly. "And perhaps to Uncle Harold's afterwards."

Anna let them out; and Ottilie, going upstairs behind Dr. Roelofsz, who hoisted himself up one step after the other, tried to understand what he was muttering, but understood nothing. He kept talking to himself:

"Yes-yes, that Anton, all-very-well, make her see a hundred! A hundred! Well, *he'll* see a hundred all right, ay-ay, yes-yes, though he *has* been such a beast! . . . Yes-yes, yes-yes, a beast: don't I

know him? Tut-tut! A beast, that's what he's been! . . . Yes-yes, perhaps he's still at it!"

"What do you say, doctor?"

"Nothing, child, nothing. . . . Make her see a hundred! I, *I,* who am old myself; eightee-eight . . . eightee-eight! . . ."

Puffing with the effort of climbing the stairs, he entered and greeted the two old people, his contemporaries, who nodded to him, each at a window:

"Well-well, yes-yes, how-do, Ottilie? How-do, Takma? . . . Well-well, yes-yes. . . . Well, I don't call it warm in here! . . ."

"Come," said Takma, "it's only September. . . ."

"Yes, you're always blazing hot inside! . . ."

Ottilie walked behind him, like a little child, and kissed her mother, very gently and carefully; and, when she went up to Takma afterwards, he pulled her hand, so that she might give him a kiss too.

CHAPTER V

Papa Dercksz had not left much behind him, but Stefanie de Laders, the only child of the first marriage, was a rich woman; and the reason why old Mamma had only a little left of her first husband's fortune was because she had never practised economy. Stefanie, however, had saved and put by, never knowing why, from an inherited proclivity for adding money to money. She lived in a small house in the Javastraat and was known in philanthropic circles, devoting herself prudently and thriftily to good works. Lot and Elly found Aunt at home: she rose from her chair, amidst a twittering of little birds in little cages, and she herself had something of a larger-sized little old bird: short, lean, shrivelled, tripping with little bird-like steps, restless, in spite of her years, with her narrow little shoulders and her bony hands, she was a very ugly little old woman, a little witch. Never having been married, devoid of passions, devoid of the vital flame, she had grown old unscathed in her little egoisms, with only one great fear, which had clung to her all her life: the fear of encountering Hell's terrors after her death, which, after all, was drawing nearer. And so she was very religious, convinced

that Calvin knew all about it, for everybody and for all subsequent ages; and, trusting blindly in her faith, she read anything of this tendency on which she could lay hands, from paper-covered tracts to theological works, though she did not understand the latter, while the former left her full of shuddering.

"Quite a surprise, children!" Aunt Stefanie de Laders screamed, as though Lot and Elly were deaf. "And when are you getting married?"

"In three months, Aunt."

"In church?"

"I don't think so, Aunt," said Lot.

"I thought as much!"

"Then you made a good guess."

"But it's not the thing. Don't you want to get married in church either, Elly?"

"No, Aunt, I agree with Lot. . . . May I say Aunt?"

"Yes, certainly, child, say Aunt. No, it's not the thing. But you get that from the Derckszes: they never thought of what might be in store for them hereafter. . . ."

The birds twittered and Aunt's high-pitched voice sounded aggressive.

"If Grandpapa could be at the wedding, I should do it perhaps, for his sake," said Elly. "But he's too old to come. Mamma Steyn doesn't make a point of it either."

"No, of course not!" screamed Aunt Stefanie.

"You see, Aunt, you're the only one in the family who *does*," said Lot.

He did not see Aunt Stefanie often; but, when he saw her, it amused him to draw her out.

"And there's no need to do it for *my* sake," said Aunt, self-righteously; and she thought to herself, "They sha'n't come in for a cent, if they don't get married in church and do the proper thing. I had intended to leave them something: now I shall leave everything to Harold's grandchildren. They at least behave properly. . . ."

But, when Elly made as though to rise, Aunt, who was flattered at having visitors, said:

"Well, stay a bit longer, come, Elly! I don't see Lot so often; and he's his aunt's own nephew after all. . . . It's not the thing, my boy. . . . You know, *I* just speak out. I've done so from a child. I'm the eldest: with a family like ours, which has not always behaved properly, I have always had to speak out. . . . I've shown a great deal of tact, however. But for me, Uncle Anton would have been quite lost, though even now he isn't always proper. But leave him to his fate I will *not*. Uncle Daniel and especially Uncle Harold, with their children: how often haven't they needed me! . . ."

"Aunt, you have always been invaluable," said Lot. "But you were not able to do much for Aunt Thérèse: she turned Catholic; and that wasn't due to your influence, surely!"

"Thérèse is lost!" cried Aunt Stefanie, violently. "I've long since given up having anything to do with Thérèse. . . . But any one for whom I can do anything . . . I sacrifice myself for. For Uncle Harold I do what I can, also for his children; to Ina I am a second mother, also to D'Herbourg: now there's a proper man for you; and Leo and Gus are good and proper boys. . . ."

"Not forgetting Lily," said Lot, "who didn't hesitate to call her first-born son after you, though I think Stefanus a queer sort of name!"

"No, you'll never call your children after me," screamed Aunt, in between the birds, "not though you get a dozen girls! What do you want me to say, my boy? Uncle Harold's family has always shown me more affection than your mother's family has; I got most perhaps from the Trevelley children! And yet God alone knows what your mother owes to me: but for me, Lot, she would have been lost! I'm not saying it to be unpleasant, my boy; but she would have been lost, Lot, but for me! Yes, you can feel grateful to me! You can see for yourself, your dear Mamma, twice divorced, from her first two husbands: no, Lot, that was anything but proper."

"My dear Aunt, Mamma has always been the black sheep of our virtuous family."

"No, no, no!" said Aunt Stefanie, shaking her restless little bird-like head; and the birds around her agreed with her and twittered their assent. "The

family's not so virtuous as that. Generally speaking, it has never been proper! I won't say a word against my mother, but this much is certain: she lost my father too early. You can't *compare* Papa Dercksz with *him*."

"Of course, there's no comparing a Dercksz with a De Laders," said Lot.

"You're being sarcastic!" said Aunt; and the birds twittered their indignation in sympathy. "But there's many a true word spoken in jest. I'm not saying it because of your mother, who's a dear child, whom I'm fond of, but all the other Dercksz es, with the exception of Uncle Harold, are . . ."

"Are what, Aunt Stefanie?"

"Are a sinful, hysterical crew!" cried Aunt Stefanie, aggressively. "Uncle Anton, Uncle Daan, Aunt Thérèse and, my boy—though she's not a Dercksz, it's in her blood—your sister Ottilie as well! They're a sinful, hysterical, crew!" And she thought, "Your mother's one of them too, my boy, though I'm not saying so."

"Then I'm once more glad," said Lot, "that *my* Dercksz hysteria is steadied by a certain Pauws calmness and sedateness." And he thought, "Aunt's quite right, but it all comes from her own mother . . . only it happened to pass over Aunt Stefanie."

But Aunt went on, seconded by the birds:

"I'm not saying it to say anything unpleasant about the family, my boy. I daresay I'm hard, but

I speak out properly. Who speaks out properly in our family?"

"You do, Aunt, you do!"

"Yes, I do, I, I, I!" cried Aunt; and all the birds in all the cages twittered their agreement. "Don't go away just yet, stay a little longer, Elly. I think it's so nice of you to have come. Elly, just ring the bell, will you? Then Klaartje will bring a brandy-cherry: I make them after the recipe of Grandmamma's Anna; and she makes them properly."

"Aunt, we must really be getting on."

"Come, just one cherry!" Aunt insisted; and the birds joined in the invitation. "Otherwise Aunt will think that you're angry with her for speaking out. . . ."

The brandy-cherries were tasted; and this put Aunt in a good humour, even when Lot exclaimed, through the twittering of the birds:

"Aunt . . . have *you* never been hysterical?"

"I? Hysterical? No! Sinful, yes: I am sinful still, as we all are! But hysterical, thank God, I have never been! Hysterical, like Uncle Anton, Aunt Thérèse and . . . your sister Ottilie, I have never been, never!"

The birds could not but confirm this.

"But you've been in love, Aunt! I hope you'll tell me the story of your romance one day; then I'll make it into a very fine book."

"You've put too much about the family into your

sinful books, as it is, for Aunt ever to tell you that, though she had been in love ten times over. For shame, boy! You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Write a moral book that's a comfort to read, but don't go digging up sinfulness for the sake of describing it, however fine the words you choose may be."

"So at any rate you think my words fine?"

"I think nothing fine that you write, it's accursed books that you write! . . . Are you really going now, Elly? Not because I don't admire Lot's books, I hope? No? Then just one more cherry. You should get the recipe from Anna, at Grandmamma's. Well, good-bye, children; and think over what sort of present you'd like from Aunt. You can choose your own, child, you can choose your own. Aunt'll give a present that's the proper thing."

The birds agreed and, as Lot and Elly took their leave, twittered them lustily out of the room.

CHAPTER VI

"OOF!" said Lot, outside, putting two fingers in his ears, which had been deafened by the birds. "No more uncles and cousins for the present, Elly: I'm not going to Uncle Harold and the D'Herbourgs after this! A grandmamma, a future grandpapa, an uncle, an aunt and a very old family-doctor: that's enough antediluvianism for one day! I can't do with any more old people to-day, not even Uncle Harold, who is far from being the most repellent. So many old people, all in one day: it's too oppressive, it's stifling! . . . Let's walk a bit, if you're not tired. It's fine, the wind'll refresh us, it won't rain. . . . Come into the dunes with me. Here's the steam-tram coming: we'll take it as far as the Witte Brug[1] and then go into the dunes. Come along!"

They went by tram to the Witte Brug and were soon in the dunes, where they went and sat in the sand, with a strong sea-breeze blowing over their heads.

"I hope I shall never grow old," said Lot. "Elly, don't *you* think it terrible to grow old, older every day? . . ."

"Your pet aversion, Lot?" asked Elly.

[1] The White Bridge.

She smiled. He looked at her seriously, almost pale in the face, but, because he saw her smiling, he managed to speak lightly:

"Worse than that. It's my nightmare. To see more and more wrinkles every day in your skin, more streaks of grey in your hair; to feel your memory going; to feel the edge of your emotions growing blunt; to feel an extra crease in your stomach which spoils the fit of your waistcoat; to feel your powers waning and your back bending under all the weight of the past which you drag along with you . . . without being able to do a thing to prevent it! . . . When your suit gets old, you buy a new one: I'm speaking from the capitalist's point of view. But your body and soul you get once for all and you have to take them with you to the grave. If you economize with either of them, then you haven't lived, whereas, if you squander them, you have to pay for it. . . . And then that past, which you tow and trail along! Every day adds its inexorable quota. We are just mules, dragging along till we can go no farther and till we drop dead with the effort. . . . Oh, Elly, it's terrible! Think of those old people of to-day! Think of Grandpapa Takma and Grandmamma! I look upon them as something to shudder at. . . . There they sit, nearly every day, ninety-three and ninety-seven, each looking out of a window. What do they talk about? Not much, I expect: their little ailments, the weather; people as old as that don't

talk, they are numbed. They don't remember things. Their past is heavy with years and crushes them, gives them only a semblance of life, of the aftermath of life: they've had their life. . . . Was it interesting or not? You know, I think it must have been interesting for those old people, else they wouldn't trouble to meet now. They must have lived through a good deal together."

"They say that Grandpapa . . ."

"Yes, that he was Grandmamma's lover. . . . Those old people: to believe *that,* when you see them *now!* . . . To realize love . . . passion . . . in those old people! . . . They must have lived through a lot together. I don't know, but it has always seemed to me, when I see them together, as if there were something being wafted between them, something strange, to and fro: something of a tragedy which has become unravelled and of which the last threads, now almost loose, are hovering between the two of them. . . . And yet their souls must be numbed: I cannot believe that they talk much; but they look at each other or out of the window: the loose threads hover, but still bind their lives together. . . . Who knows, perhaps it was interesting, in which case it might be something for a novel. . . ."

"Have you no idea, at the moment?"

"No, it's years since I had an idea for a novel. And I don't think that I shall write any more. You see, Elly, I'm getting . . . too old to write

for very young people; and who else reads novels?"

"But you don't write only for the public; you have your own ideal of art!"

"It's such a barren notion, that principle. All very fine when you're quite young: then it's delightful to swagger a bit with that ideal of art; you go in for it then as another goes in for sport or a cultivated palate. . . . Art really isn't everything. It's a very beautiful thing, but, properly speaking, it oughtn't to be an aim in life. Artists combine a great deal of pretentiousness with what is really a small aim."

"But, Lot, the influence they exercise . . ."

"With a book, a painting, an opera? Even to the people who care about it, it's only an insignificant pleasure. Don't go thinking that artists wield great influence. All our arts are little ivory towers, with little doors for the initiate. They influence life hardly at all. All those silly definitions of art, of Art with a capital A, which your modern authors give you—art is this, art is that—are just one series of exaggerated sentences. Art is an entertainment; and a painter is an entertainer; so is a composer; so is a novelist."

"Oh, no, Lot!"

"I assure you it is so. You're still so precious in your conception of art, Elly, but it'll wear away, dear. It's an affectation. Artists are entertainers, of themselves and others. They have always been

so, from the days of the first troubadours, in the finest sense of the word. Make the sense of it as fine as you please, but entertainers they remain. An artist is no demigod, as we picture him when we are twenty-three, like you, Elly. An entertainer is what he is; he entertains himself and others; usually he is vain, petty, envious, jealous, ungenerous to his fellow-entertainers, puffed up with his principles and his art, that noble aim in life; just as petty and jealous as any one else in any other profession. Then why shouldn't I speak of authors as entertainers? They entertain themselves with their own sorrows and emotions; and with a melancholy sonnet or a more or less nebulous novel they entertain the young people who read them. For people over thirty, who are not in the trade, no longer read novels or poems. I myself am too old to write for young people. When I write now, I have the *bourgeois* ambition to be read by my contemporaries, by men getting on for forty. What interests them is actual life, seen psychologically, but expressed in concrete truths and not reflected in a mirage and poetized and dramatized through fictitious personages. That's why I'm a journalist and why I enjoy it. I like to grip my reader at once and to let him go again at once, because neither he nor I have any time to spare. Life goes on. But to-morrow I grip him again; and then again I don't want to charm him any longer than I grip him. In our ephemeral lives, this, journalism, is the ephemeral

and the true art, for I want the form of it to be frail but chaste. . . . I don't say that I have got so far myself; but that is *my* artistic ideal. . . . ."

"Then will you never write any more novels?"

"Who can say what he will or will not do again? Say it . . . and you do something different all the same. Who knows what I shall be saying or doing in a year's time? If I knew Grandmamma's inner life, I should perhaps write a novel. It is almost history; and, even as I take an interest in the story of our own time, in the anticipation of our future, so history has a great charm for me, even though history depresses humanity and human beings and though our own old folk depress me. Grandmamma's life is almost history: emotions and events of another period. . . ."

"Lot, I wish you would begin to work seriously."

"I shall start working as soon as we are in Italy. The best thing, Elly, is not to think of setting up house yet. Not with Mamma and also not by ourselves. Let us go on wandering. When we are very old it will be time enough to roost permanently. What draws me to Italy is her tremendous past. I try to reach antiquity through the Renascence, but I have never got so far and in the Forum I still think too much of Raphael and Leonardo."

"So first to Paris . . . and then Nice . . ."

"And on to Italy if you like. In Paris we shall look up another aunt."

"Aunt Thérèse?"

"Yes. That's the one who is more Catholic than the Pope. And at Nice Ottilie. . . . Elly, you know that Ottilie lives with an Italian, she's not married: will you be willing to see her all the same?"

"I should think so," said Elly, with a gentle smile. "I am very anxious to see Ottilie again. . . . The last time was when I heard her sing at Brussels."

"She has a heavenly voice . . ."

"And she's a very beautiful woman."

"Yes, she is like Papa, she is tall, she doesn't take after Mamma a bit. . . . She could never get on with Mamma. And of course she spent more of her time with Papa. . . . She's no longer young, she's two years older than I. . . . It's two years since I saw her. . . . What will she be like? I wonder if she is still with her Italian. . . . Do you know how she met him? By accident, in the train. They travelled in the same compartment from Florence to Milan. He was an officer. They talked to each other . . . and they've been together ever since. He resigned his commission, so as to go with her wherever she was singing. . . . At least, I believe they are still together. . . . 'Sinful and hysterical,' Aunt Stefanie would say! . . . Who knows? Perhaps Ottilie met a great happiness . . . and did not hesitate to seize it. . . . Ah, most people hesitate . . . and grope about! . . ."

"We're different from Ottilie, Lot, and yet we don't grope . . . or hesitate. . . ."

"Elly, are you quite sure that you love me?"

She bent over him where he lay, stretched out in the sand, leaning on his two elbows. She felt her love inside her very intensely, as a glowing need to live for him, to eliminate herself entirely for his sake, to stimulate him to work, but to great, very great work. . . . That was the way in which her love had blossomed up, after her grief. . . . Under the wide sky, in which the clouds drifted like a great fleet of ships with white, bellying sails, a doubt rose in her mind for perhaps one moment, very vaguely and unconsciously, whether he would need her as she herself intended to give herself. . . . But this vague, unconscious feeling was dissipated in the breeze that blew over her temples; and her almost motherly love was so intense and glowing that she bent over him and kissed him and said, quite convinced and certain of herself, though not so certain of life and the future:

"Yes, Lot, I am sure of it."

Whatever doubt he may have entertained was scattered in smiles from his soul after this tender and simple affirmation that she loved him, as he felt, for himself alone, in a gentle, wondering bliss that already seemed to see happiness approaching. . . .

CHAPTER VII

HAROLD DERCKSZ, the second son, was seventy-three, two years younger than Anton. He was a widower and lived with his only daughter, Ina, who had married Jonkheer [1] d'Herbourg and had three children: Lily, a young, flaxen-haired little woman, married to Van Wely, an officer in the artillery, and two boys, Pol and Gus, who were at the university and the grammar-school respectively.

It was sometimes very unpleasant for Ina d'Herbourg that her father's family, taken all round, did not display a correct respectability more in keeping with the set in which she moved. She was quite at one with Aunt Stefanie—with whom she curried favour for other reasons too—and she agreed with Aunt that Grandmamma had been ill-advised, after having married a De Laders, to get married again to one of the much less distinguished Dercksz es: this though Ina herself was a Dercksz and though her very existence would have been problematical if Grandmamma had not remarried. Ina, however, did not think so far as this: she was merely sorry not to be a De Laders; and the best thing was to mention Papa's family as little as possible. For this reason she denied Uncle Anton,

[1] A Dutch title of nobility, ranking below that of baron.

as far as her acquaintances were concerned, he being a discreditable old reprobate, about whom the queerest stories were rumoured. At the same time, he was a moneyed uncle; and so she caused him to be kept in view, especially by the young Van Wely couple, for Ina, in her very small soul, was both a good daughter to her father and a good mother to her children and would like to see Uncle Anton leave his money—how much would he have?—to her children. Then there was the Indian family of Uncle Daniel, who was Papa's partner in business in Java and who came over to Holland at regular intervals: well, Ina was glad when business went well—for that meant money in the home—and when Uncle Daniel and fat, Indian Aunt Floor were safe on board the outward mail again, for really they were both quite unpresentable, Uncle with his East-Indian ways and Aunt such a *nonna*[1] that Ina was positively ashamed of her! Well, then, in Paris you had Aunt Thérèse van der Staff, who, after leading a pretty loose life, had turned Catholic: there you were, that again was so eccentric! The De Laders had always been Walloons[2] and the D'Herbourgs also were always

[1] A half-caste.

[2] The Walloon Protestants are a branch of the French Calvinists imported into the Netherlands at the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. They differ from the general body of Dutch Calvinists only in the use of the French language and the Geneva Catechism. They are gradually dying out as a separate body.

Walloons: really, Walloonism was more distinguished than Catholicism, at the Hague. The best thing was . . . just never to mention Aunt Thérèse. Last but not least, there was Aunt Ottilie Steyn de Weert, living at the Hague, alas, three times married and twice divorced! And she had a daughter who was a singer and had gone to the bad and a son who had written two immoral novels: oh, that was a terrible thing for Ina d'Herbourg, you know; it was such bad form and so incorrect; and all their acquaintances knew about it, though she never mentioned Aunt Ottilie or her three husbands, who were all three alive! And, when Ina d'Herbourg thought of Aunt Steyn de Weert, she would cast up her weary, well-bred eyes with a helpless air and heave a deep sigh; and, with that glance and her despair, she looked an entire IJsselmonde. For she herself, she thought, inherited more of the aristocratic blood of her mother, a Freule[1] IJsselmonde, than of her father's Dercksz blood. An only daughter, she had been able, through the Aunts IJsselmonde, to mix in rather better circles than the all too East-Indian circle of her father's family, in so far as that circle existed, for the family was little known in society: an isolation seemed to reign around the Dercksz, who knew very few people; and even her mother, when she was still alive, had never been able to push

[1] The title borne by the unmarried daughters of Dutch noblemen.

Papa forward as something of a specialist in East-Indian affairs and make him aim at the colonial secretaryship, hard though she had tried to do so.

No, Father was not to be dragged out of his innate, silent timidity; and, though he was quite gentle and amenable, though he joined in paying all the visits that were deemed essential, though he gave dinners and went out to dinner, he remained the man he was, a quiet, peaceful man of business, ailing in health and silently broken in soul, with pain and suffering in his eyes and around his mouth, but never complaining and always reticent. Harold Dercksz was now a tall, thin old man; and that intermittent suffering and eternal silence seemed to grow worse with the years of sorrow and pain, seemed no longer capable of concealment; yet he spoke of it to nobody but his doctor and not much to him. For the rest, he was silent, never talked about himself, not even to his brother Daan, who came at regular intervals to Holland on the business-matters in which they were both interested.

Ina d'Herbourg was a good daughter: when her father was ill, she looked after him as she looked after everything in the house, correctly and not without affection. But she did sometimes ask herself whether her mother had not been disappointed in her marriage, for Papa had not much money, in spite of all the Indian business. Yes, Mamma had been disappointed financially; and financial disappointment was always facing Ina too. But,

when Ina's husband, Leopold d'Herbourg—who, after taking his degree in law, had first thought of entering the diplomatic service, but who, in spite of his self-importance, had not felt himself sufficiently gifted for that career and was now a briefless barrister—when Ina's husband was also disappointed with the Indian money, then Ina, after a few domestic scenes, began to think that it would be her fate always to long for money and never to have any. Now, it was true, they lived in a big house and Papa was very generous and bore the whole expense of keeping Pol at Leiden; but yet things didn't go easily with Ina, the money trickled through her fingers and she would very much have liked to see more money about, a great deal more money. That was why she was pleasant to Aunt Stefanie de Laders and pleasant, furtively, to Uncle Anton.

Her fate continued to persecute her: instead of Lily's waiting a little and making a good match, she had fallen so deeply in love, when hardly twenty, with Frits van Wely, a penniless subaltern, that Ina could do nothing, especially when Papa said:

"Do let the children be happy! . . ."

And he had given them an allowance, but it meant sheer poverty; and yet Frits and Lily were married and in less than no time there was a boy. Then the only thing that Ina could induce them to do was to call the baby after Aunt Stefanie.

"Stefanus?" Lily exclaimed, in dismay.

Well, anything for a quiet life! They would call the boy Stef, which sounded rather nice, for Aunt would never hear of Etienne. Ina would have liked Stefanus Anton best; but to this Frits and Lily would not consent.

It was a principle of Ina d'Herbourg's never to talk about money and never about the family; but, because principles are very difficult to maintain, there was always talk about money in the D'Herbourgs' house and a great deal of talk about the family. Both were grateful subjects of conversation between Ina and her husband; and, now that Lot Pauws was engaged to Elly Takma, the talk flowed on of its own accord, one evening after dinner, while Harold Dercksz sat looking silently in front of him.

"How much do you think they'll have, Papa?" asked Ina.

The old gentleman made a vague gesture and went on staring.

"Lot, of course, has nothing," said D'Herbourg. "His parents are both alive. I daresay he makes something by those articles of his, but it can't amount to much."

"What does he get for an article?" asked Ina, eager to know at all costs.

"*I* don't know, I haven't the remotest notion!" cried D'Herbourg.

"Do you think he'll get anything from old Pauws? He lives in Brussels, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but old Pauws has nothing either!"

"Or from Aunt Ottilie? She has the money her father left her, you know. Steyn has nothing, has he, Father? Besides, why should Steyn give Lot anything?"

"No," said D'Herbourg. "But old Mr. Takma has plenty: Elly's sure to get something from him."

"I can't understand how they are going to live," said Ina.

"They won't have less than Lily and Frits."

"But I can't understand how those two are going to live either!" Ina retorted.

"Then you should have found your daughter a rich husband!"

"Please," said Ina, wearily closing the well-bred eyes, with the glance of the IJsselmondes, "don't let us talk about money. I'm sick and tired of it. And other people's money . . . is *le moindre de mes soucis*. I don't care in the least how another person lives. . . . Still . . . I believe that Grandmamma is better off than we think."

"I know roughly how much she ought to have," said D'Herbourg. "Deelhof the solicitor was saying the other day . . ."

"How much?" asked Ina, eagerly; and the weary eyes brightened up.

But, because he saw an expression of pain come over his father-in-law's face and wrinkle it and because he did not know whether the pain was physical or moral, arising from gastritis or from nerves, D'Herbourg evaded the question. It was

difficult, however, to stop at once, even though Papa did look pained, and so he said:

"Aunt Stefanie must be comfortably off."

"Yes, but I should think," said Ina, "considering how Uncle Anton used to hoard while he was a resident, that he's much better off than Aunt Stefanie. As an unmarried man, he never entertained during his term of office: that I know for a fact. The resident's house was tumbling to pieces when he left it after eight years. . . ."

"But Uncle Anton is an old reprobate," said D'Herbourg, forcibly, "and *that* cost him money."

"*No!*" said Harold Dercksz.

He said it as though in pain, waving his hand in a gesture of denial; but he had no sooner uttered this single word in defence of his brother than he regretted it, for Ina asked, eagerly:

"No, Papa? But surely Uncle Anton's life won't bear investigation . . ."

And D'Herbourg asked:

"Then how was he able to be such a beast, without paying for his pleasures? . . ."

Harold Dercksz cast about for a word in palliation; he said:

"The women were fond of Anton . . ."

"Women? Flappers, you mean!"

"No, *no!*" Harold Dercksz protested, repudiating the suggestion with his lean old hand.

"Ssh!" said Ina, looking round.

The boys entered.

"Why, Uncle Anton was had up thirty years ago!" D'Herbourg continued.

"No, no," Harold Dercksz protested.

Pol, the student, and Gus, the younger boy, entered; and there was no more talk about money and the family that evening; and, because of the boys, the after-dinner tea went off pleasantly. Truly, Ina was a good mother and had brought her boys up well: because of old Grandfather, they were gay without being noisy, which always gave Harold Dercksz an agreeable, homely feeling; and they were both very polite, to the great contentment of Ina, who was able to say that Pol and Gus did not get *that* from the Dercksz̆es: when Grandfather rose to go to his study upstairs, Gus flew to the door and held it open, with very great deference. The old man nodded kindly to his grandson, tapped him on the shoulder and went up the stairs, reflecting that Ina was a good daughter, though she had her faults. He liked living in her house. He would have felt very lonely by himself. He was fond of those two boys. They represented something young, something that was still on its way to maturity, merrily and gaily, those two young-boyish lives: they were not, like all the rest, something that passed, things that passed, slowly and threateningly, for years and years and years. . . .

On reaching his study, Harold Dercksz turned up the gas and dropped into his chair and stared. Life sometimes veiled things, veiled them silently, those

terrible, life-long things, and then they did not threaten so greatly and, until death came and wiped them away, they passed, passed always, however slowly they might pass. But they passed away very slowly, the things. He was an old man now, a man of seventy-three, and an infirm old man, dragging his old age to the grave for which he was yearning. How many sufferings had he not endured! He could not understand why he need grow so old, while the things passed so slowly, went silently by, but with such a trailing action, as though they, the things of the past, were ghosts trailing very long veils over very long paths and as though the veils rustled over the whirling leaves that fluttered upon the paths. All his long aftermath of life he had seen the things go past and he had often failed to understand how seeing them go past like that was not too much for a man's brain. But the things had dragged their veils and the leaves had just rustled: never had the threat been realized; no one had stepped from behind a tree; the path had remained desolate under his eyes; and the path wound on and on and the ghostly things went past. . . . Sometimes they looked round, with ghostly eyes; sometimes they went on again, with dragging slowness: they were never brought to a standstill. He had seen them pass silently through his childhood, through his boyhood, when he was the age of Pol and Gus; he had seen them pass through his very commonplace life as a coffee-planter in Java and a

manufacturer afterwards and through his married life with a woman whose existence he had come to share by mistake, even as she had come by mistake to share his: he, doubtless, because he did nothing but see those things, the things that passed. . . . He now coughed, a hard, dry cough, which hurt his chest and stomach and sent jolts shooting through his shrunken legs. . . .

Oh, how much longer would it last, his seeing the things? . . . They went past, they went past and loitered and loitered. . . . Oh, why did they not go faster? . . . From the time when he was a little fellow of thirteen, a merry, sportive little fellow playing barefoot in the river before the assistant-resident's house, rejoicing in the fruit, the birds, the animals, rejoicing in all the glad child-life of a boy in Java who can play in big grounds, beside running waters, and climb up tall, red-blossoming trees; from the moment—a sultry night, the dark sky first threatening and then shedding heavy, clattering torrents of rain—from the moment when he saw the things, the first things, the first terrible Thing: from that moment a confusion had crept over his tender brain like a monster which had not exactly crushed the child, but which had ever since possessed it, held it in its claws. . . . All the years of his life, he had seen the Thing rise up again, like a vision, the terrible Thing begotten and born in that night when, being no doubt a little feverish, he had been unable to sleep under the heavy, leaden night, which

still held up the rain in powerful sails that could not burst and allowed no air through for him to breathe. The vision? No, the Thing, the actual Thing . . .

*

* *

A lonely *pasangrahan*[1] in the mountains: he is there alone with his two parents, he the darling of his father, who is taking his sick-leave. The other brothers and the sisters have been left behind in the town, in the assistant-resident's house.

He cannot sleep and he calls:

"*Baboe,* come here! . . ."

She does not answer. Where is she? As a rule, she lies outside his door, on her little mat, and wakes at once.

"*Baboe, baboe,* come here!"

He becomes impatient; he is a big boy, but he is frightened, because he has a touch of fever too, like Papa, and because the night is so sultry, as though an earthquake were at hand.

"*Baboe!* . . ."

She is not there.

He struggles up and gets entangled in the *klamboe,*[2] which he is unable to open in his feverish terror. . . . He now releases himself from the muslin folds and is again about to call out for his

[1] Dak bungalow.

[2] Mosquito-curtain.

baboe . . . but he hears voices, whispering, in the back verandah. . . . The blood curdles in the boy's body: he thinks of thieves, of *ketjoes,*[1] and is horribly frightened. . . . No, they are not speaking Javanese: they are not *ketjoes.* They are speaking Dutch, with Malay in between; and he next recognizes Baboe's voice. And he tries to utter a scream of fright, but his fright prevents him. . . . What are they doing, what is happening? The boy is clammy, cold. . . . He has heard his mother's voice: he now recognizes the voice of Mr. Emile, Mr. Takma, the secretary, who is so often at the house in the town. . . . Oh, what are they doing out there in the dark? . . . He was frightened at first, but now he is cold rather and shivers and does not know why. . . . What can be happening? What are Mamma and Mr. Takma and Ma-Boeten doing out there in the night? . . . His curiosity overcomes his terrors. He keeps very quiet, only his teeth chatter; he opens the door of his room, very gently, to prevent its creaking. The middle verandah is dark, the back verandah is dark. . . .

"Hush, *baboe,* hush, O my God, hush! . . . Quietly, quietly. . . . If the *sinjo*[2] should hear! . . ."

"He's asleep, *kandjeng.*[3] . . ."

"If the *oppas*[4] should hear! . . ."

[1] Native robber-bands.

[2] The young gentleman.

[3] Mem-sahib.

[4] From the Dutch *oppasser:* overseer, watchman.

"He's asleep, *kandjeng*. . . ."

"O my God, O my God, if he should wake! . . . Oh, *baboe, baboe,* what are we to do? . . . ."

"Be quiet, Ottilie, be quiet! . . ."

"Nothing else for it, *kandjeng:* in the river, in the river! . . ."

"O my God, O my God, no, no, *not* in the river!"

"Do keep quiet, Ottilie!"

"O my God, no, not in the river!"

"It's the only way, Ottilie! Be quiet, be quiet! Hold your tongue, I say! Do you want to get us both taken up . . . for murder?"

"I? Did I murder him?"

"*I* couldn't help it! *I* acted in self-defence! *You* hated him, *I* didn't, Ottilie. But you did it with me."

"Oh, my God, no, no!"

"Don't try to avoid your share of the blame!"

"No, no, no!"

"You hung on to him . . ."

"Yes, no . . ."

"When I snatched his kris from him!"

"Yes . . . yes . . ."

"Hush, *kandjeng,* hush!"

"O my God, O my God, it's lightening! . . . Oh, what a clap, what a clap!"

The mountains echo the rolling thunder, again and again and yet again. The torrent pours down, as though the rain-sails were tearing. . . .

The boy hears his mother's scream.

"Quiet, Ottilie, quiet!"

"I can bear it no longer, I shall faint!"

"Be quiet! Hold his leg. *Baboe,* you take the other leg!"

"There's blood, on the floor. . . ."

"Wipe it up."

"Presently, *kandjeng,* oh, presently! . . . First to the river. . . ."

"O my God, O my God!"

The boy's teeth chatter and his eyes start from his head and his heart thumps, in his fever. He is mortally frightened, but he wants to see, too. He does not understand and, above all, he wants to see. His childish curiosity wants to see the terrible Thing which he does not yet understand. Silently, on his bare feet, he steals through the dark verandah. And, in the dim light of the night outside . . . he sees! He sees the Thing! A flash of lightning, terrible; a clap of thunder, as if the mountains were falling . . . and he has seen! He is now looking only at vagueness, the vague progress of something which they are carrying . . . of somebody whom they are carrying, Mamma, Mr. Emile and Ma-Boeten. In his innocence, he does not realize *whom.* In his innocence, he thinks only of terrible things and people, of robbers and treasures, of creepy incidents in his story-books. . . . *Whom* are they carrying through the garden? Can't Papa hear them? Won't he wake? Is he so fast asleep?

Now he no longer hears their voices. . . . Now

they have disappeared in the garden. . . . Doesn't the *oppas* hear? . . . No, everything remains quiet; everything has disappeared in the darkness and the rain; he sees nothing but the rain pouring in torrents, pelting, pelting, furiously. The furious pelting prevents Father and Oppas from hearing. . . . The sky has burst and all the rain in the sky is pelting down. . . . He is shivering with cold and fever. And suddenly he feels his little bare foot stepping on something warm and soft. . . . It is blood, clotted blood. . . .

He no longer dares to move forwards or backwards. He stands with his teeth chattering and all the clatter of the rain around him. . . . But he must wake his father, take refuge with him, hide himself in his arms and sob and sob with fright! . . . He gropes his way back to the middle verandah; he sees the door of Mamma's room standing open: a little lamp is flickering faintly. Again his foot feels the soft warmth and he shudders at the terrible mire, which is blood, clotted blood, and lies everywhere, on the matting. But he wants to get to the little lamp, to take it with him to Papa's room, so far away, near the front verandah. He goes to the lamp and takes it and sees Mamma's bed all tumbled, with the pillows on the floor. . . . And he now sees the red on the floor, already almost black, and he is terrified and feels icy cold and steps aside with the lamp, so as not to tread on a kris, a handsome presentation weapon, which Papa received from the

Regent[1] yesterday! There it lies . . . and the blade is red! Now everything is misty-red before his childish eyes, oh, terribly red in the verandah, with its dancing shadows, through which he, so small, goes with his little lamp, in his terror and fever: perhaps he is dreaming! . . . To Papa's room:

"Papa, oh, Papa, oh, Papa!"

He is stammering with fright, at his wits' end without Papa's protection.

He opens Papa's door:

"Papa, oh, Papa, oh, Papa!"

He goes up to the bed with his little lamp in his hand. Papa has slept in the bed, but is not there now. . . . Where is Papa? . . . And of a sudden it stands revealed to his childish mind. He sees the terrible Thing, sees it as a dreadful, awful, blood-red haunting vision. What they carried away through the garden, through the pouring rain, to the river . . . was Papa, was Papa! What Mamma and Mr. Emile and Ma-Boeten are carrying away outside . . . is Papa! . . . He is all alone in the house . . . Papa is dead and they are carrying him to the river. . . . He has seen the Thing. . . . He goes on seeing the Thing. . . . He will always see it. . . . He does not know why—he has suddenly grown years older—but he shuts Papa's door, goes back, puts Mamma's lamp where he found it and goes back to his own room. He trembles in the dark and his teeth chatter and his

[1] A title of an independent native prince, equivalent to rajah.

eyes start and stare out of his head. But he washes his feet, in the dark, and at once flings the towel into the linen-basket. He creeps into bed, pulls the *klamboe* to, pulls the coverlet over his ears. And he lies shaking with fever. The iron bedstead underneath him trembles in unison. He is alone in the *pasangrahan* and he has seen the terrible Thing: first the actual progress of it and then the revealing vision, in the glare of the lightning-flashes, under the roar of the mountain-cleaving thunder. He lies and shakes. . . . How long does it last? How long does it last? . . . Half an hour, three-quarters of an hour. . . . He hears Baboe coming back and Mamma moaning, sobbing, groaning and Ma-Boeten muttering:

"Hush, *kadjeng,* hush! . . ."

"They're sure to have seen us! . . ."

"No, there was no one there. . . . Think of Sinjo Harold, *kandjeng!* . . ."

Everything becomes still. . . .

Deathly still. . . .

The boy lies shaking with fever; and all night long his starting eyes stare and he sees the Thing. . . .

He has seen it ever since; and he has grown to be an old man. . . .

Next day, Papa's body is discovered among the great boulders in the river. There are suggestions of a *perkara*[1] with a woman, in the *kampong,*[2] of

[1] Business, fuss, bother.

[2] Compound.

jealousy. But Dr. Roelofsz finds that the wound was caused by nothing more than a sharp rock, to which Dercksz tried to cling, when drowning. . . . No need to credit natives' gossip. . . . No question of a murder. . . . The controller draws up the report: Assistant-resident Dercksz—staying temporarily in the *pasangrahan,* unable to sleep because of his fever and the sultry weather—went out during the night, for the sake of air. . . . The *oppasser* heard him . . . and was rather surprised, for it was raining in torrents. . . . But it was not the first time that the *kandjeng* had gone out into the jungle at night, because of his sleeplessness. . . . He missed his way; and the river was swollen. . . . It was impossible for him to swim, among the great rocks. . . . He was drowned in the stormy night. . . . His body was found by natives some distance below the *pasangrahan,* while Mrs. Dercksz, on waking in the morning, was very uneasy at not finding her husband in his room. . . .

*

* *

Harold Dercksz sat and stared.

In his silent, gloomy business-man's study, he saw the Thing pass, but with such a trailing movement and so slowly. . . . And he did not notice the door open and his daughter Ina enter.

"Father . . ."

He did not answer.

"Father! Father . . ."

He started.

"I have come to say good-night. . . . What were you thinking of so hard, Father?"

Harold Dercksz drew his hand over his forehead:

"Nothing, dear . . . things . . . old things. . . ."

He saw them: there they went, trailing long spectral veils over rustling leaves . . . and . . . and was anything threatening behind the trees in that endless path? . . .

"Old things? . . . Oh, Father, they are past by now! . . . *I* never think of old things: the life of to-day is difficult enough for people without money. . . ."

She kissed him good-night. . . .

No, the old things . . . are not yet the things of the past. . . . They are passing, they are passing . . . but so slowly!

CHAPTER VIII

Lot Pauws was sitting in his room, writing, when he heard the voices of his mother and of her husband, Steyn, below. Mamma Ottilie's voice sounded shrill, in steadily rising anger; and Steyn's calm, indifferent bass voice boomed with short, jerky sentences and egged on Mamma's words till she stuttered them out and almost choked in the panting effort.

Lot put down his pen with a sigh and went downstairs. He saw the old servant-maid listening eagerly at the kitchen-door, but she disappeared when she heard Lot's footstep on the stair.

Lot entered the room:

"What's the matter?"

"What's the matter? What's the matter? I'll tell you what's the matter: I was a fool when I married, I was a fool to bring my property into settlement. If I hadn't, I could have done as I pleased! Aren't they my children, my own children? If they want money, can't I send it to them? Must they starve, while he . . . while he . . . ."

She pointed to Steyn.

"Well, what?" said Steyn, challenging her.

"While he blews my money on women, his everlasting, low women . . ."

"I say, Mamma!"

"Well, it's true!"

"Hush, Mamma, for shame: don't talk like that! What's it all about, Steyn?"

"Mamma has had a letter from London."

"From the Trevelleys?"

"From Hugh. He asks for money."

"And can't I send my son money if I want to?" cried Mamma to Lot. "Isn't Hugh my child, isn't he my son? It's bad enough of you to object to my seeing much of them, but am I to break with them altogether? If Hugh is without an appointment for the moment, can't I send him some money? Isn't it my money? Steyn has *his* money, his pension. I don't ask him for his money!"

"Look here, Lot," said Steyn. "Mamma can do as she likes, of course. But there is hardly enough as you know, for our regular expenses. If Mamma goes and sends Hugh fifty pounds, I don't know how we shall manage. That's all; and for the rest I don't care what Mamma says."

"You blew my money on low women, for you're low yourself and always have been!"

"Mamma, stop that! And be quiet. I can't stand quarrelling and scolding. Be quiet. Be quiet, Mamma. Let me see Hugh's letter."

"No, I sha'n't let you see it either! What do you imagine? I'm not accountable to my son! Are you also siding with that brute against your mother? You'd both of you like me to break with

my own children, my own flesh and blood, my darlings, my *d-dar-lings,* because it suits your book! When do I see them? When? Tell me, when? Mary, John, Hugh: when do I see Hugh? Suppose I *was* mistaken in their father, aren't they my own children, just as much as you and Ottilie? I can't let my boy starve!"

"I know quite well that Hugh abuses your kindness, your weakness . . . not to speak of the two others."

"That's right, don't you speak of them! Just break with your brothers and sisters! Just think that there's nobody in the world but yourself and that your mother has no one but you; and go and get married and leave your mother alone with that fellow, that low fellow, who sneaks out at night to his women! Because he's still young! Because he's so young and his wife is old! But, if he has to go to his women and if you get married, I promise you I won't stay in the house alone and I swear I'll go to Hugh. My own dear boy, my *d-dar-ling:* when do I see him? When do I see him? I haven't seen him for a year!"

"Please, Mamma, keep calm and don't scream so. Talk quietly. You make me so dreadfully tired with that screaming and quarrelling and scolding: I can't stand it . . . I won't ask you to show me Hugh's letter. But Steyn is right; and, from what I know of our present financial position, it would be folly to send six hundred guilders to Hugh, who never has

more than some vague 'appointment' in the City. You can't do it."

"Yes, I can, selfish brute that you are! What do you know about your mother's money? I always have money when I want it!"

"Yes, I know: you lose it and then you find it again in your cupboard. . . ."

"And, though I don't find it in my cupboard this time and if Steyn keeps the money locked up, I shall just go to the bank and ask for it and they won't refuse me. And I'll have it sent by the bank. There, you see, I *can* do it, grasping, selfish brutes that you both are! I'll put on my hat and go. I'll go at once, I'll go to the bank; and Hugh . . . Hugh shall have his money to-morrow or next day, any day. I should do it for you, Lot, or for Ottilie; and I shall do it for Hugh. I am his mother and I shall do it: I shall, I shall, so *there!*"

She stammered and choked with rage; and a prick of jealousy, because Lot had defended Steyn and because Steyn cared more for Lot than for her, drove into the flesh of her heart and caused her such suffering that she no longer knew what she was saying and felt like boxing Lot's ears and felt that . . . that she could have murdered Steyn! And she flounced out of the room, pale with passion, knocking against the furniture, slamming the door, and rushed upstairs. She could have sobbed with that pricking pain. . . . Steyn and Lot heard her moving and stamping overhead, putting on her things

and talking to herself and scolding, scolding, scolding.

Steyn's hard features, rough but handsome under his beard, were suddenly twisted to softness by a spasm of despair.

"Lot, my dear fellow," he said, "I've stood this for nearly twenty years."

"Now then, Steyn!"

"For nearly twenty years. Screaming, scolding, wrangling. . . . She's your mother. We won't say any more about it."

"Steyn, she's my mother and I'm fond of her, in spite of everything; but you know I feel how you must suffer."

"Suffer? I don't know. A chap gets dulled. But I do think sometimes that I've thrown away my life in a most wretched way. And who's benefited by it? Not even *she*."

"Try to look upon her as a child, as a tempersome, spoilt child. Be nice to her, once in a way. A kind word, a caress: that's what she needs. She's a woman who lives on petting. Poor Mamma: I know nobody who needs it as she does. She leans up against me sometimes, while I stroke her. Then she's happy. If I give her a kiss, she's happy. If I tell her she's got a soft skin, she's happy. She is a child. Try to look upon her as that; and be nice to her, just once or twice."

"I can't, any longer. I was mad on her, madly in love with her, at one time. If she hadn't always

quarrelled and been so impossibly unreasonable, we could still be living together amicably. Though she is older than I, we could still have got on. But she's impossible. You see it as well as I do. There's no money; and, because she doesn't discover any in her cupboard this time, she simply goes and draws it from the bank to send to Hugh. It's those letters from the Trevelleys which cause scenes at regular intervals. They bleed her in turns; and the shabbiest part of it, you know, is that the father's at the back of it."

"Is that quite certain?"

"Yes. Trevelley's always at the back of it. He influences those children. We are getting into debt for Trevelley's sake. . . . Lot, I've often thought of getting a divorce. I wouldn't do it, because Mamma has been twice divorced already. But I sometimes ask myself, am I not throwing away my life for nothing? What good am I to her or she to me? We are staying together for nothing, for things that are past, for a passion that is past: one moment of mad, insensate blindness, of not knowing or caring, of just wanting. . . . For things that are past I have been throwing away my life, day after day, for twenty years on end. I am a simple enough chap, but I used to enjoy my life, I enjoyed the service . . . and I have taken a dislike to everything and go on wasting my life day after day . . . For something that is quite past I . . ."

"Steyn, you know I appreciate what you do. And

you're doing it purely for Mamma's sake. But, you know, I have often said to you, go your own way. Barren sacrifices make no appeal to me. If you think you will still find something in life by leaving Mamma, then do so."

But Steyn seemed to have recovered his indifference:

"No, my boy, what's spoilt is spoilt. Twenty years wear out a man's energy to make something more of his life. I felt at the time that I oughn't to desert Mamma, when she was left all alone, not wholly through my fault, perhaps, but still very much so. To leave her now, when she is an old woman, would be the act of a cad: I can't do it. I take that line not as a barren sacrifice, but because I can't help it. I don't allow my life to be made a hell of. I go my own way when I want to, though Mamma exaggerates when she pretends that I go to a woman at night."

"Mamma is naturally jealous and she's still jealous of you."

"And she's jealous of you. She's an unhappy woman; and the older she grows the unhappier she will be. She's one of those people who ought never to grow old. . . . Come along, Jack, we're going for a walk. . . . But, Lot, if Mamma goes on like this, we shall have to have her property administered for her. There's nothing else for it."

Lot gave a start: he pictured Mamma with her property transferred to an administrator; and yet

Steyn was right. He thought that he had better have a quiet talk with Mamma. For the moment, there was nothing to be done: Mamma was exasperated, was behaving like a lunatic and would send Hugh the fifty pounds.

Lot went back to his room and tried to resume his work. He was writing an essay *On Art,* proving that art was entertainment and the artist an entertainer. He did not know whether he agreed with everything that he was saying, but that didn't matter and was of no importance. It was a subject to fill a few brilliant pages, written with all his talent for words; and it would catch the public, it would be read: it would rouse indignation on the one side and a smile on the other, because there really might be a good deal in it and because Charles Pauws might be right in what he said. He lovingly fashioned his sentences out of beautiful words, making them seem convincing through their brilliancy. . . . But in between the sentences he thought of poor Mamma and suddenly found that he could not go on writing. He pitied her. He felt for Steyn, but he pitied poor Mamma. . . . He rose and paced his room, which was full of spoils of Italy: a few bronzes, a number of photographs after the Italian masters. A good fellow, Steyn, to let him have this room next to Mamma's and to go up to the top floor himself. But he pitied his mother, who was such a child. She had always been a child: she could not help being and remaining a child. She had been so very

pretty and so seductive: a little doll always; and he remembered, when he was already a boy of seventeen, how perfectly charming Mamma used to look: so young, so extraordinarily young, with that adorable little face, those blue childlike eyes and that perfect, plump figure. She was thirty-eight then, without a sign of age; she was a pretty woman in the full bloom of her attractiveness. He had no need to look at Mamma's photographs as she was in those days and earlier: he remembered her like that; he remembered her looking like a young girl in a low, creamy-white lace dress, which she did not even take the trouble to put on very neatly, looking above all things charming, so intensely charming; he remembered her in a brown-cloth frock trimmed with astrakhan, with a little astrakhan cap on her frizzy hair, skating with him on the ice, so lightly and gracefully that people believed her to be his sister. . . . Poor Mamma, growing old now! And yet she still looked very nice, but she was growing old; and she had nothing—he was sure of this—she had nothing but her faculty for love. She had five children, but she was not a mother: Lot laughed and shook his head at the thought. He had educated himself; Ottilie had very early become aware of her great talent and her beautiful voice and had also educated herself; the Trevelleys had run more wild. . . . No, Mamma was not a mother, was not a woman of domestic tastes, was not even a woman of the world: Mamma had nothing but her faculty

for love. She needed love, probably no longer needed passion, but still needed love; and what she needed most, needed mortally, was petting, like a child. And nobody petted her more than he did, because he knew that Mamma was mad on petting. She had once said to him, pointing to a photograph of his half-brother Hugh Trevelley, a good-looking lad turned twenty:

"Lot, it's eight months since I had a kiss from him!"

And he had seen something in Mamma as though she were craving for Hugh's kiss, though he sometimes treated her so roughly and cavalierly. Of course, this was also a motherly feeling on Mamma's part, but it was perhaps even more a need to have this lad, who was her son, caress her, caress her sweetly. . . . And were they to put her under any kind of restraint? Perhaps it would have to come! It would be perfectly horrid: that dear Mummy! But she was so silly sometimes! So stupid! Such a child, for such an old woman! . . . Oh, it was terrible, that growing old and older and yet remaining what you were! How little life taught you! How little it formed you! It left you as you were and merely wore off your sharp and attractive irregularities! . . . Poor Mamma, her life was made up of nothing but things that were past . . . and especially things of love! . . . Aunt Stefanie spoke of hysteria; and a great streak of sensual passion had run through the family; but it

did not come from the Dercksz, as Aunt Stefanie pretended: it came from Grandmamma herself. He had always heard that, like his mother, she too had been a woman of passion. People talked of all sorts of adventures which she had had in India, until she met Takma. There was a kind of curse on their family, a curse of unhappy marriages. Both of Grandmamma's marriages had turned out unhappily: General de Laders appeared to have been a brute, however much Aunt Stefanie might defend her father. With Grandpapa Dercksz, so people said, Grandmamma was exceedingly unhappy: the adventures dated back to that time. Grandpapa Dercksz was drowned by falling at night into the swollen river behind a *pasangrahan* in the Tegal mountains. Lot remembered how that had always been talked about, how the rumours had persisted for years. The story, which dated sixty years back, ran that Grandpapa Dercksz had shown kindness to a woman in the *kampong* and that he was stabbed by a Javanese out of jealousy. It was mere gossip: Dr. Roelofsz said that it was mere gossip. . . . A curse of unhappy marriages. . . . Uncle Anton had never been married; but in him the streak of passion developed into a broad vein of hysteria. . . . Uncle Harold, human but inscrutable, had been unhappy with his *freule,* who was too Dutch for an Indian planter. . . . Uncle Daan, in India —they were on their way to Holland at this moment—was to outward appearances not unhappy

with a far too Indian wife, Aunt Floor: they were now old and staid and sedate, but there was a time when the fatal streak had run through both of them, developing in Aunt—a Dillenhof, belonging to Grandmamma's family—into the vein, the broad vein. Well, that was all past: they were old people now. . . . Aunt Thérèse van der Staff had become a Catholic, after an unhappy marriage; they said that Theo, her son, was not the son of her husband. . . . And his own poor mother, thrice married and thrice unhappily!

He had never looked at it like this before, throughout and down the generations, but, when he did, it was terrible: a sort of clinging to the social law—of marriage—which was suited to none of those temperaments. Why had they married? They were all old people now, but . . . if they had been young now, with modern views, would they have married? Would they have married? Their blood, often heated to the point of hysteria, could never have endured that constraint. They had found the momentary counterparts of their passion, for not one of them—with the exception perhaps of Uncle Harold—had married for other than passionate reasons; but, as soon as the constraint of marriage oppressed them, they had felt their fate, the social law which they had always honoured, thoughtlessly and instinctively, and which did not suit them; they had felt their family curse of being married and unhappy. . . . And he himself, why was he get-

ting married? He suddenly asked himself the question, seriously, as he had once asked his mother in jest. Why was he getting married? Was he a man for marriage? Did he not know himself only too well? Cynical towards himself, he saw himself as he was and was fully aware of his own egotism. He knew all his little vanities, of personal appearance, of a fine literary style. . . . He smiled: he was not a bad sort, there were worse than he; but, in Heaven's name, why was he getting married? Why had he proposed to Elly? . . . And yet he felt happy; and, now that he was seriously asking himself why he was getting married, he felt very seriously that he was fond of Elly, perhaps fonder than he himself knew. But—the thought was irrepressible—why get married? Would *he* escape the family curse? Wasn't Ottilie at Nice really right, Ottilie who refused to marry and who lived unbound with her Italian officer—she herself had written to tell him so—until they should cease to love each other? Was the streak continued in her or . . . was she right and he wrong? Was she, his sister, a woman, stronger in her views of life than he, a man? . . . Why, why get married? Couldn't he say to Elly, who was so sensible, that he preferred to live unbound with her? . . . No, it was not feasible: there remained, however little it might count with them, the question of social consideration; there was her grandfather; there were people and things, conventions, difficulties. No, he

could not put it to Elly; and yet she would have understood it all right. . . . So there was nothing for it but to get married in the ordinary way and to hope—because they loved each other so thoroughly and not only out of passion—that the curse would not force its fate upon them, the yoke of an unhappy marriage. . . .

Those people, those uncles and aunts, had been unhappy, in their marriages. They were now growing old; those things of other days were now all passing. . . . They were passing. . . . Would they come to him, who was still young? Must they come around him, now that he was growing older? Oh, to grow older, to grow old! Oh, the terrible nightmare of growing old, of seeing the wintry-grey vistas opening before him! To be humbled in his conceit with his appearance did not mean so very much; to be humbled in his conceit with his literary gifts hurt more; but to be humbled in his whole physical and moral existence: that was the horror, the nightmare! Not humbled all at once, but slowly undergoing the decay of his young and vigorous body, the withering of his intelligence and his soul. . . . Oh, to grow as old as Grandmamma and as Grandpapa Takma: how awful! And those were people who had *lived* for their ninety years and more. An atom of emotion still seemed to be wafted between the two of them, an atom of memory. Who could tell? Perhaps they still talked . . . about the past. . . . But

to grow so old as that: ninety-seven! Oh, no, no, not so old as that: let him die before he decayed, before he withered! He felt himself turn cold with dread at the thought and he trembled, now that he realized so powerfully the possibility of growing as old as that: ninety-seven! . . . O God, O God, no, no! . . . Let him die young, let it be over, in his case, while he was still young! He was no pessimist, he loved life: life was beautiful, life was radiant; there were so many beautiful things in art, in Italy, in his own intellect: in his own soul even, at present, that emotion for Elly. But he loved young and vigorous life and did not want decay and withering. Oh, for vigour, vigour always, youth always! To die young, to die young! He implored it of That which he accepted as God, that Light, that Secret, which perhaps, however, would not listen from out of Its unfathomable depths of might to a prayer from him, so small, so selfish, so unmanly, so cowardly, so vain, so incredibly vain! Oh, did he not know himself? Did he pretend not to see himself as he was? Could he help seeing himself as he was?

He paced his room and did not hear the door open.

"And the fifty pounds is in the post!"

He started. His mother stood before him, looking like a little fury: her blue eyes blazed like those of a little demon and her mouth was wide open like a naughty child's.

"Oh! . . . Mamma!

"Lot! . . . What's the matter with you?"

"With me? . . . Nothing. . . ."

"Oh, my boy, my boy, what's the matter with you?"

He was shivering as in a fever. He was quite pale. He tried to master himself, to be manly, plucky and brave. A dark terror overwhelmed him. Everything went black before his eyes.

"My dear, my dear . . . what is it?"

She had thrown her arm round him and now drew him to the sofa.

"Oh, Mamma! . . . To grow old! To grow old!"

"Hush, darling, be still!"

She stroked his head as it lay on her shoulder. She knew him like that: it was his disease, his weakness; it returned periodically and he would lie against her thus, moaning at the thought of growing old, of growing old. . . . Ah, well, it was his disease, his weakness; she knew all about it; and she became very calm, as she would have done if he had been feverish. She fondled him, stroked his hair with regular strokes, trying not to disorder it. She kissed him repeatedly. She felt a glow of content because she was petting him; her motherly attitude was bound to calm him.

"Hush, darling, be still!"

He did keep still for a moment.

"Do you really think it so terrible . . . to

grow old . . . perhaps . . . later on?" asked Ottilie, melancholy in spite of herself.

"Yes. . . ."

"I didn't think it pleasant either. But you . . . you are so young still!"

He was already regaining his self-control and feeling ashamed of himself. He was a child, like his mother, an ailing, feeble, hysterical child at times. That was *his* hysteria, that dread of old age. And he was looking for consolation to his mother, who was not a mother! . . .

No, he regained his self-control, was ashamed of himself:

"Oh, yes . . . I'm young still!" he made an effort to say, indifferently.

"And you're going to be married: your life is only just beginning . . ."

"Because I'm getting married?"

"Yes, because you're getting married. If only you are happy, dear, and not . . . not as your mother . . ."

He gave a little start, but smiled. He regained his self-control now and at the same time regained his control over his mother, to whom he had looked for a moment for consolation and who had always petted him. And he fondled her in his turn and gave her a fervent kiss:

"Poor little creatures that we are!" he said. "We sometimes act and think so strangely! We *are* very ill and very old . . . even though we

are still young. . . . Mamma, I must have a serious talk with you some day . . . *serious,* you know. Not now, another time: I must get on now with my work. Leave me to myself now and be calm . . . and good. Really, I'm all right again. . . . And don't *you* go on behaving like a little fury!"

She laughed inwardly, with mischievous delight:

"I've sent off the fifty pounds for all that!" she said, from behind the open door.

And she was gone.

He shook his head:

"I am sorry for her!" he thought, analysing his emotions. "And . . . for myself! Even more for myself. We poor, poor creatures! We ought all to be placed under restraint . . . but whose? Come, the best thing is to get to work and to keep working, strenuously, always. . . ."

CHAPTER IX

Old Takma was just coming from the razor-back bridge by the barracks, stiff and erect in his tightly-buttoned overcoat, considering each step and leaning on his ivory-knobbed stick, when Ottilie Steyn de Weert, arriving from the other side, saw him and went up to him:

"How do you do, Mr. Takma?"

"Ah, Ottilie, how do you do? . . . Are you going to Mamma's too?"

"Yes. . . ."

"It was raining this morning and I thought I shouldn't be able to go. Adèle was grumbling because I went out after all, but it's fine now, it's fine now. . . ."

"I think it'll rain again presently though, and you haven't even an umbrella, Mr. Takma."

"Well, you see, child, I hate an umbrella: I never carry one. . . . Fancy walking with a roof over your head!"

Ottilie smiled: she knew that the old man could not lean on his stick when holding up his umbrella. But she said:

"Well, *if* it rains, may I see you home? . . . That is, if you won't have a carriage?"

"No, child, I think a carriage even more horrid than an umbrella."

She knew that the jolting of a cab caused him great discomfort.

"The only carriage in which I'm likely to drive will be the black coach. Very well, child, if it rains, you shall bring me home . . . and hold your little roof over my head. Give me your arm: I'll accept that with pleasure."

She gave him her arm; and, now that he was leaning on her, his stiff, straight step became irregular and he let himself go and hobbled along like a very old, old man. . . .

"How quiet you are, child!"

"I, Mr. Takma?"

"Yes."

"You notice everything."

"I could hear at once by your voice that you were not in good spirits."

"Well, perhaps I am worried. . . . Here we are."

She rang at old Mrs. Dercksz': old Anna, inside, came hurrying at a great rate to open the door.

"I'll just take breath, Anna," said the old gentleman, "just take breath . . . keep on my coat, I think . . . and take breath for a moment . . . in the morning-room."

"It's getting coldish," said old Anna. "We shall start fires soon in the morning-room. The mistress never comes downstairs, but there's often some one

waiting; and Dr. Roelofsz is a very chilly gentleman. . . ."

"Don't start fires too soon, don't start fires too soon," said the old man, querulously. "Fires play the dickens with us old people. . . ."

He sat down, wearily, in the morning-room, with his two hands on the ivory knob of his stick. Anna left them to themselves.

"Come, child, what is it? Worry?"

"A little. . . . I shall be so lonely. . . . The wedding's to-morrow."

"Yes, yes . . . to-morrow is Lot and Elly's wedding. Well, they'll be very happy."

"I hope so, I'm sure. . . . But I . . ."

"Well?"

"I shall be *un*happy."

"Come, come!"

"What have I left? Not one of my children with me. I sometimes think of going to England. I have John and Hugh there . . . and Mary is coming home from India."

"Yes, child, as we grow older, we are left all alone. Look at me. Now that Elly is marrying, I shall have no one but Adèle. It's lucky that I can still get out . . . and that I sometimes see Mamma . . . and . . . and all of you . . . and Dr. Roelofsz. . . . But, if I were helpless, what would there be for *me?* . . . You, you're young still."

"I? Do you call *me* young? . . ."

"Yes, child, aren't you young? . . ."

"But, Mr. Takma, I'm sixty!"

"Are you sixty? . . . Are you *sixty?* . . . Child, do you mean to tell me you're sixty?"

The old man cudgelled his brains, fighting against a sudden cloud in his memory that hazed around him like a mist. And he continued:

"No, you must be mistaken. You *can't* be sixty."

"Yes, really, Mr. Takma, really: I'm sixty!"

"Oh, Lietje, my child, are you really . . . as old . . . as that!"

He cudgelled his brains . . . and closed his eyes:

"Sixty!" he muttered. "More than sixty . . . more than sixty years . . ."

"No, sixty exactly."

"Yes, yes, sixty! Oh, child, are you really sixty? I thought you were forty or fifty at most . . . I was dreaming. . . . The old man was dreaming . . . Sixty! . . . More than sixty years ago! . . ."

His voice mumbled; she did not understand what he meant:

"Were you a little confused?"

"When?" he asked, with a start.

"Just now."

"Just now? . . ."

"When you thought . . . that I was forty."

"What do you say?"

"When you thought that I was *forty*."

"Yes, yes . . . I hear what you say. . . . I can still hear very well. . . . I have always heard very well . . . too well . . . too well . . . ."

"He's wandering," thought Ottilie Steyn. "He's never done that before."

"So you're sixty, child!" said the old man, more calmly, recovering his voice. "Yes, I suppose you must be. . . . You see, we old people, we very old people, think that you others always remain children . . . well, not children, but young . . . that you always remain young. . . . Ah . . . and you grow old too!"

"Oh, yes, *very* old! And then there's so little left."

Her voice sounded ever so sad.

"Poor girl!" said old Takma. "But you oughtn't to quarrel so with Pauws . . . I mean . . . I mean, with Trevelley."

"With Steyn, you mean."

"Yes, I mean, with Steyn . . . of course."

"I can't stand him."

"But you could, once!"

"Ah . . . when one's in love . . . then . . . !"

"Yes, yes, you were able to stand him at one time!" said the old man, obstinately. "And so the wedding is to-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow."

"I can't be there: I'm very sorry, but . . ."

"Yes, it would tire you too much. . . . They're coming to take leave of Grandmamma presently."

"That's nice, that's nice of them."

"It'll be a tame affair," said Ottilie. "They are so tame. There'll be nothing, no festivity. They refuse to be married in church."

"Yes, those are their ideas," said the old man, in a tone of indifference. "I don't understand it, that 'not being married in church;' but they must know their own business."

"Elly hasn't even a bridal dress; I think it so odd. . . . Elly is really *very* serious for so young a girl. I shouldn't care to be married like that, when you're married for the first time. But, on the other hand, what's the use of all that fuss, as Lot says? The relations and friends don't really care. And it runs into money."

"Elly could have had whatever she liked," said the old gentleman, "a dinner, a dance or anything . . . But she refused."

"Yes, they're both agreed."

"Those are their ideas," said the old man, with indifference.

"Mr. Takma . . ." said Ottilie, hesitatingly.

"Yes, child?"

"I wanted to ask you something, but I dare not. . . ."

"What are you afraid of, child? Do you want something?"

"No, not exactly, but . . ."

"But what, child? . . . Is it money?"

Ottilie heaved a great sob:

"I hate asking you! . . . I think it's horrid of me. . . . And you mustn't *ever* tell Lot that I ask you sometimes. . . . But, you see, I'll tell you frankly, I've sent Hugh some money; and now . . . and now I have nothing left for myself. . . . If you hadn't always been so immensely kind to me, I should never dare ask you. But you've always spoilt me, as you know. . . . Yes, you know: you've always had a soft place in your heart for me. . . . And, if you don't think it horrid of me to ask you and if you could . . . let me have . . ."

"How much do you want, child?"

Ottilie looked at the door, to see if any one was listening:

"Only three hundred guilders. . . ."

"Why, of course, child, of course. Come round to-morrow, to-morrow evening . . . after the wedding. . . . And, when you want anything, ask me, do you see? Ask me with an easy conscience. . . . You can ask me whenever you please. . . ."

"You *are* so good to me! . . ."

"I have always been very fond of you . . . because I'm so very fond of your mother. . . . So ask me, child . . . ask me whenever you please, only . . . be sensible . . . and don't do . . ."

"Don't do what, Mr. Takma?"

The old man suddenly became very uncertain in his speech:

"Don't do . . . don't do anything rash. . . ."

"What do you mean? . . ."

"Sixty years . . . sixty years ago . . ."

He began to mumble; and she saw him fall asleep, sitting erect, with his hands on the ivory knob of his stick.

She was frightened and, stealing noiselessly to the door, she opened it and called:

"Anna . . . Anna. . . ."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Come here. . . . Look. . . . Mr. Takma has fallen asleep. . . . We'd better stay with him till he wakes up, hadn't we?"

"Oh, the poor soul!" said the maid, compassionately.

"He isn't . . . ?" asked Ottilie, in the voice of a frightened child.

But Anna shook her head reassuringly. The old man slept on, stiff and straight in his chair, with his hands resting on his stick.

The two women sat down and watched.

CHAPTER X

THERE was a ring; and Ottilie whispered:

"Do you think that's Mr. Lot and Miss Elly? . . ."

"No," said Anna, looking out of the window, "it's Mr. Harold."

And she went to the front-door. Ottilie came out to her brother in the passage.

"How are you, Ottilie?" said Harold Dercksz. "Is there no one with Mamma?"

"No. I met Mr. Takma just outside the door. Look, he's fallen asleep. I'm waiting here till he wakes."

"Then I'll go up to Mamma meanwhile."

"You're looking poorly, Harold."

"Yes. I do not feel well. I'm in pain . . ."

"Where?"

"Everywhere. Heart, liver: everything's wrong. . . . So to-morrow is the great day, Ottilie?"

"Yes," said Ottilie, mournfully, "to-morrow. . . . They're so unenterprising. No reception and no religious marriage."

"Lot asked me to be one of his witnesses."

"Yes, you and Steyn, with Dr. Roelofsz and D'Herbourg for Elly. . . . Anton declined. . . ."

"Yes, Anton doesn't care for that sort of thing."

He went upstairs slowly, knocked, opened the door. The companion was sitting with the old woman and reading something out of the paper in a monotonous voice. She rose from her chair:

"Here's Mr. Harold, mevrouw."

She left the room; and the son bent over his mother and gave her a very gentle kiss on the forehead. As it was dark, the lined porcelain of the old woman's face was hardly indicated in the crimson twilight of the curtains and the tall valance. She sat on the chair, in the cashmere folds of her wide dress, straight upright, as on a throne; and in her lap the frail fingers trembled like slender wands in the black mittens. A few words were exchanged between mother and son, he sitting on a chair beside her, for no one ever took the chair by the window, which was kept exclusively for Mr. Takma: words about health and weather and the wedding of Elly and Lot next day. Sometimes a look of pain came over Harold's parchment-coloured face; and his mouth was drawn as though with cramp. And, while he talked about Lot and about health and weather, he saw—as he always saw, when sitting here beside or opposite Mamma—the things that passed and dragged their ghostly veils over the path rustling with dead leaves: the things that passed so slowly, years and years to every yard, until it seemed as though they never would be past and as though he would always continue to see them, ever drawing out their pageant along the age-long path.

While he talked about health and weather and Lot, he saw—as he always saw, when sitting beside or opposite Mamma—the one thing, the one terrible Thing, the Thing begotten in that night of clattering rain in the lonely *pasangrahan* at Tegal; and he heard the hushed voices: Baboe's whispering voice; Takma's nervous-angry voice of terror; his mother's voice of sobbing despair; himself a mere child of thirteen. He knew; he had seen, he had heard. He was the only one who had heard, who had seen. All his life long—and he was an old, sick man now—he had seen the Thing slowly passing like that; and the others had heard nothing, seen nothing, known nothing. . . . Had they really not known, not seen, not heard? He often asked himself the question. Roelofsz must surely have seen the wound. And Roelofsz had never mentioned a wound; on the contrary, he had denied it. . . . Rumours had gone about, vague rumours, of a woman in the *kampong,* of a stab with a kris, of a trail of blood: how many rumours were there not going about! His father was drowned in the river, one sultry night, when he had gone into the garden for air and been caught in the pelting rain. . . . The Thing, the terrible Thing was passing, was a step farther, looked round at him with staring eyes. Why did they all live to be so old and why did the Thing pass so slowly? . . . *He knew*: he had known more . . . because of rumours which he had heard; because of what he had guessed instinct-

ively in later years, when he was no longer a child: his father hearing a sound . . . a sound of voices in his wife's room. . . . Takma's voice, the intimate friend of the house. . . . His suspicions: was he right? Was it Takma? Yes, it was Takma. . . . Takma in his wife's room. . . . His rage, his jealousy; his eyes that saw red; his hand seeking for a weapon. . . . No weapon but the kris, the handsome ornamental kris, a present which Papa received only yesterday from the Regent. . . . He steals to his wife's room. . . . There . . . *there* . . . he hears their voices. . . . They are laughing, they are laughing under their breath. . . . He flings himself against the door; the bamboo bolt gives way; he rushes in. . . . Two men face to face because of a woman. . . . Their contest, their passion, as in primeval days. . . . Takma has snatched the kris from Harold's father. . . . No longer human beings, no longer men, but male animals fighting over a female. . . . No other thoughts in their red brains and before their red gaze but their passion and their jealousy and their wrath. . . . His father mortally wounded! . . . But Harold Dercksz does not see his mother in all this: he does not see her, he does not know how she behaves, how she behaved during the struggle between these two animal men. . . . He does not see how the female behaved: that never rose up before his intuition, however often he may have stared after the Thing that passed, however often,

for years and years, again and again he may have sat beside his mother, talking about health and weather. And to-day it is much stronger than his whole being; and he asks the very old woman:

"Was your companion reading the paper to you?"

"Yes."

"Does she read nicely?"

"Yes. She sometimes finds it difficult to know what to choose."

"Politics don't interest you?"

"The war does: it's terrible, all that loss of human life."

"It's murder . . . on a large scale. . . ."

"Yes, it's murder. . . ."

"Does she read you the serial story?"

"No, no; I don't care for serials."

"No more do I."

"We are too old for that."

"Yes, we old people have our own serial stories. . . ."

"Yes. . . . A quiet life's the best. . . ."

"Then you have nothing to reproach yourself with. . . ."

He sees the slender, wand-like fingers tremble. *Has* she anything to reproach herself with, more than her infidelity to the man who was her husband? He has never seen it for himself; and yet the Thing has always and always dragged its ghostly veils rustling over dead leaves. . . .

"Hasn't she been reading about that murder?"

"What murder?"

"In England, the woman who . . . ."

"No, no, she never reads me that sort of thing. . . ."

Her words are almost an entreaty. . . . How old she is, how old she is! . . . The toothless mouth trembles and mumbles, the fingers shake violently. He is full of pity, he, the son, who knows and who suspects what he does not know, because he knows the soul of that mother, her soul now dulled and blunted in waiting for the body's death, but her soul also once a soul of passion, of temper, an amorous creole soul, capable at one moment of forgetting all the world and life itself for a single instant of rapture . . . or perhaps of hate! He knows that she hated his father, after first adoring him; that she hated him because her own passion expired before him in a heap of ashes. . . . This had all been made clear to him, gradually, year after year, when he was no longer a child but grew into a man and was a man and understood and looked back and reflected and pieced together what he had understood and looked back upon. . . . He suspects, because he knows her soul. But how blunted that soul is now; and how old she is, how old she is! A pity softens his own soul, old, old, too, and full of melancholy for all the things of life gone by . . . for his mother . . . and for himself, an old man now. . . . How old she is, how old

she is! . . . Hush, oh, hush: let her grow just a little older; and then it will be over and the Thing will have passed! The last fold of its spectral veil will have vanished; the last leaf on that endless, endless path will have rustled; and, though once a rumour, vaguely, with a dismal moaning, hovered through those trees, it never grew into a voice and an accusation and, from among those trees, no one ever stepped forward with threatening hand that stayed the Thing, the sombre, ghostly Thing, dragging itself along its long road, for years and years and years. . . .

CHAPTER XI

THE front-door bell made old Takma wake with a start. And he knew that he had been to sleep, but he did not allude to it and quietly acted as though he had only been sitting and resting, with his hands leaning on his ivory-knobbed stick. And, when Dr. Roelofsz entered, he said, with his unvarying little joke:

"Well, Roelofsz, you don't get any thinner as the years go by!"

"Well-well," said the doctor, "d'you think so, Takma?"

He came rolling in, enormous of paunch, which hung dropsically and askew towards his one stiff leg, which was shorter than the other; and, in his old, clean-shaven, monkish face, his bleared little eyes glittered behind the gold spectacles and were angry because Takma was always referring to his paunch and he didn't like it.

"Harold is upstairs," said Ottilie Steyn.

"Come, child," said Takma, rising with an effort, "we'd better go upstairs now; then we'll drive Harold away. . . ."

They went up slowly. But there was another ring at the front-door.

"There's *such* a bustle some days," said old Anna to the doctor. "But the mistress isn't neglected in her old age! We shall soon have to start fires in the morning-room, for there's often some one waiting here. . . ."

"Yes-yes-yes," said the doctor, rubbing his short, fat, fleshy hands with a shiver. "It's coldish, it's chilly, Anna. You may as well have a fire. . . ."

"Mr. Takma says fires are the dickens."

"Yes, but he's always blazing hot inside," said Dr. Roelofsz, viciously. "Well-well-well, here are the children. . . ."

"Can we go up?" asked Elly, entering with Lot.

"Yes, go upstairs, miss," said Anna. "Mr. Harold is just coming down; and there's no one upstairs but Mamma . . . and Mr. Takma."

"Grandmamma's holding a court," said Lot, jestingly.

But his voice hesitated in joking, for a certain awe always oppressed him as soon as he entered his grandmother's house. It was because of that atmosphere of the past into which he sometimes felt too hyperimaginative to intrude, an atmosphere from which bygone memories and things constantly came floating. The old doctor, who had something of a monk and something of a Silenus in his appearance, was so very old and, though younger than Grandmamma, had known her as a young and seductive woman. . . . Here was Uncle Harold coming down the stairs: he was much younger, but a deep

and mysterious melancholy furrowed his faded face, which moreover was wrung with physical pain.

"Till to-morrow, till to-morrow, children," he said, gently, and went away after shaking hands with them. "Till to-morrow, till to-morrow, Roelofsz. . . ."

That voice, broken with melancholy, always made Lot shudder. He now followed Elly up the stairs, while the doctor remained below, talking to old Anna:

"Yes-yes-yes, well-well-well!"

The ejaculations pursued Lot as he mounted the stairs. Each time that he came to the house he became more conscious of finding himself on another plane, more sensitive to that atmosphere of former days, which seemed to drag with it something that rustled. A whole past lay hidden behind the joviality of the voluble doctor. Oh, to grow old, to grow old! He shivered at the thought on that first autumnal day. . . . They now entered the room: there they sat, Grandmamma, Grandpapa Takma and, in between them, so strangely, like a child, Lot's mother. And Lot, walking behind Elly, modulated his tread, his gestures, his voice; and Elly also was very careful, he thought, as though she feared to break that crystal, antique atmosphere with too great a display of youth.

"So you're to be married to-morrow? That's right, that's right," said the old woman, contentedly.

She raised her two hands with an angular gesture and, with careful and trembling lips, kissed first Elly and then Lot on the forehead. They were now all sitting in a circle; and a few words passed at intervals; and Lot felt as if he himself were a child, Elly quite a baby, his mother a young woman. She resembled Grandmamma, certainly; but what in Grandmamma had been an imposing creole beauty had been fined down in Mamma, had become the essence of fineness, was so still. Yes, she was like Grandmamma, but—it struck him again, as it had before—she had something, not a resemblance, but a similar gesture, with something about the eyes and something about the laugh, to Grandpapa Takma. . . . Could it be true after all, what people had whispered: that the youngest child, Ottilie, had been born too long after Dercksz' death for his paternity to be accepted, for the paternity to be attributed to any one but Takma? Were they really sitting there as father, mother and child? He, was he Takma's grandson? Was he a cousin of Elly's? . . . He didn't know it for certain, nothing was certain: there were—he had heard them very long ago—those vague rumours; and there was that likeness! But, if it was so, then they both knew it; then, if they were not quite dulled, they were thinking of it at this moment. They were not in their dotage, either of them, those old, old people. It seemed to Lot that some emotion had always continued to sharpen their wits; for it was wonderful how well

Grandmamma, despite her age, understood all about everything, about his marriage now, about the family:

"Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor are on their way from India," said Grandmamma. "I can't imagine what they are coming for . . . with the winter so near. Aunt Floor won't like it, I know. . . . I only wish that *I* had remained in India, instead of coming here. . . . Yes, I've been sitting here for years now, until . . . until . . ."

She stammered and looked out of the window, waiting, waiting. At the other window sat Takma and waited, waited, nodding his head. Oh, it was awful, thought Lot, looking at his mother. She did not understand his look, had forgotten his moment of prostration and weakness, his dread of old age, because she always forgot when he did not complain; and she merely thought that he wanted to get up. She smiled, sadly, as was her custom in these days, nodded and was the first to rise:

"Well, we'd better be going now, Mamma. . . . Mr. Takma, am I not to see you home?"

"No, child, it's not raining; and I can manage by myself, I can manage. . . ."

Ottilie's voice sounded very sad and childish and old Takma's paternal, but fluttering and airy. Lot and Elly rose; and there were more careful kisses; and Mr. Takma kissed Ottilie also. When they were gone, the old doctor came rolling in.

"Well, Roelofsz," said Grandmamma.

"Well-well-well, yes-yes," mumbled the doctor, dropping into a chair.

They sat like that, without words, the three old people. The light was waning outside; and a bleak autumnal wind drove the first yellow leaves through the gardens of the Sofialaan.

"You're out too late, Takma," said the doctor.

"No, no," said the old man.

"It gets chilly early, at this season."

"No, no, I'm not chilly."

"Yes, you're always blazing hot inside."

"Yes, just as you're always getting fatter."

The doctor gave an explosive laugh, not viciously this time, because he had got his joke in first; and Takma also laughed, with a shrill, cracked note. The old woman did not speak, leant over slightly, looked out of the window. The dusk of evening was already gathering over the Nassaulaan.

"Look," said the old woman, pointing with her trembling, slender, wand-like finger.

"What?" asked the two men, looking out.

"I thought . . ."

"What?"

"I thought that there was something . . . moving . . . over there, under the trees. . . ."

"What was moving?"

"I don't know: something . . . somebody. . . ."

"She's wandering," thought the doctor to himself.

"No, Ottilie," said Takma, "there's nothing moving."

"Oh, is there nothing moving?"

"No."

"I thought that something was passing . . . just hazily. . . ."

"Yes . . . well . . . that's the damp rising," said the doctor.

"Yes," said Takma, "that's mist. . . ."

"You're out of doors much too late, Takma," said the doctor.

"I've got my great-coat, a warm one. . . ."

"Well-well. . . ."

"The leaves are rustling," said the old woman. "And the wind's howling. It'll soon be winter."

"Well . . . yes-yes, winter's coming. One more of 'em. . . ."

"Yes," said the old woman. "The last . . . the last winter. . . ."

"No-no-no-no!" boasted the old doctor. "The last! I promise you, you'll see a hundred yet, Ottilie! . . ."

Old Takma nodded his head:

"It's more than sixty years . . ."

"Wha-at?" exclaimed the doctor, in a startled voice.

"Ago . . ."

"What are you saying?" cried the old woman, shrilly.

"I'm saying," said Takma, "that Ottilie, that Lietje . . . is turned sixty . . ."

"Oh, yes!"

"And so it's more than sixty . . . more than sixty years ago since . . ."

"Si-ince *what?*" exclaimed the doctor.

"Since Dercksz . . . was drowned," said Takma.

And he nodded his head.

"Oh!" moaned the old woman, lifting her hands to her face with an angular and painful movement. "Don't speak about that. What made you say that?"

"No," said Takma, "I said nothing. . . ."

"No-no-no-no!" mumbled the doctor. "Don't talk about it, don't talk about it. . . . We never talk about it. . . . Yes . . . aha . . . Takma, what made you talk about it? . . . There-there-there-there . . . it's nothing, but it makes Ottilie sad. . . ."

"No," said the old woman, calmly. "I'm never sad now. . . . I'm much too old for that. . . . I only sit and wait. . . . Look, isn't that something passing? . . ."

"Where?"

"In the street, opposite . . . or down there, in the road . . . something white. . . ."

"Where? Aha, oh, there? . . . No, Ottilie, that's mist."

"The leaves . . . the leaves are rustling."

"Yes-yes-yes, autumn . . . winter's coming. . . ."

"The last," said the old woman.

The doctor mumbled a vague denial. Takma nodded his head. They sat very still, for a time. Yes, it was more than sixty years ago. . . . They all three saw it: the old man and the old woman saw it happening; and the doctor saw it as it had happened. He had understood and guessed, at once, and he had known, all those years long. Very many years ago he had been in love with Ottilie, he much younger than she, and there was a moment when he had called upon her to pay him the price of his knowledge. . . . He had buried all that in himself, but he saw it as it had happened. . . . It was more than sixty years ago.

"Come," said Takma, "it's time I went. . . . Else . . . else it'll be too late. . . ."

He rose with an effort and remembered that he had not torn up one letter to-day. That was not right, but the tearing tired his fingers. The doctor also arose and rang the bell twice, for the companion.

"We're going, juffrouw."

It was almost dark in the room.

"Good-bye, Ottilie," said Takma, pressing the mittened hand, which was raised an inch or two.

The doctor also pressed her hand:

"Good-bye, Ottilie. . . . Yes-yes-yes: till to-morrow or next day."

Mr. Takma found Ottilie Steyn de Weert waiting downstairs:

"You here still, child?"

"Yes, Mr. Takma. I'll just see you home. You've really stayed out too late to-day; Elly thought so too; and Adèle will be uneasy. . . ."

"Very well, child, do; see the old man home."

He took her arm; and his now irregular step tottered as Anna let them out.

"Juffrouw," said the old woman, upstairs, when the companion was about to light the lamp, "wait a moment and just look out of the window. Tell me: there, on the other side of the road, through those leaves falling . . . isn't there something . . . something white . . . passing?"

The companion looked through the window:

"No, mevrouw, there's nothing. But there's a mist rising. Mr. Takma has stayed much too long again."

She closed the shutters and lit the lamp. The old woman sat and took her soup; then the companion and old Anna put her to bed.

CHAPTER XII

Old Mr. Pauws came to meet them at the station, in the evening, at Brussels:

"My dear boy, my *dear* boy, how are you? And so this is your little wife! My dear child, I wish you joy with all my heart!"

His arms, thrown wide, embraced first Lot and then Elly.

"And I've taken a room for you at the Métropole, but I reckoned on it that you'd first come and have supper at my place. Then I shall have been at your wedding too. I don't expect you're tired, are you? No, it's nothing of a journey. Better send your trunks straight to the hotel. I've got a carriage: shall we go home at once? Do you think there's room for the three of us? Yes, yes, we'll fit in nicely."

It was the second time that Elly had seen the old gentleman, a pink-and-white, well-preserved man of seventy: she had been with Lot to look him up during their engagement. There was something decided and authoritative about him, together with a cheerful gaiety, especially now, because he was seeing Lot again. He would receive them at his own place, at his rooms, for he lived in bachelor quarters. He opened the door with his latch-key; he had paid the

cabman quickly, before Lot could; and he now hustled the young couple up the stairs. He himself lit a gas-jet in the passage:

"I have no one to wait on me in the evening, as you see. A *femme-de-ménage* comes in the morning. I take my meals at a restaurant. I thought of treating the two of you to supper at a restaurant; but I think this is pleasanter. . . . There!"

And he now lit the gas in the sitting-room, with a quick movement, like a young man's. Elly smiled at him. The table was laid and there were flowers on it and a few pints of Heidsieck in a wine-cooler.

"Welcome, my dear child!" said the old man, kissing Elly.

He helped her take off her hat and cloak and carried them into his bedroom:

"You'd better bring your coat in here too, Lot."

"Your father is wonderful!" said Elly.

The little sitting-room was cosy and comfortable; it was his own furniture. There were books about; photographs on the walls and prints of horses and dogs; arms on a rack; and, underneath—it impressed Elly, just as it had impressed her the first time—a portrait of Ottilie at twenty, in an old-fashioned bonnet which made her look exquisitely pretty, like a little heroine in a novel. Strange, thought Elly to herself, Steyn also had pictures of dogs and horses in his room; Steyn also was a hunting man, a man of out-door pursuits; Steyn also was good-looking. She smiled at her reflection that it

was always the same sort of manliness that had attracted Ottilie; she smiled just as Lot sometimes smiled at his mother.

"You two are very like each other," said Pauws, as they sat down to table. "Look, children, here's what I've got for you. Everything's ready, you see. Hors d'œuvres. Do you like caviare, with these toasted rolls?"

"I'm mad on caviare," said Lot.

"I remembered that! After the hors d'œuvres, a mayonnaise of fish: perhaps that's rather too much fish, but I had to think out a cold menu, for I've no cook and no kitchen. Then there's cold chicken and compote: a Dutch dish for you; they never eat the two together here or in France. Next, there's a *pâté-de-foie-gras*. And tartlets for you, Elly."

"I'm fond of tartlets too," said Lot, attentively examining the dish.

"All the better. A decent claret, Château-Yquem and Heidsieck. I got you some good fruit. Coffee, liqueurs, a cigar, a cigarette for you, Elly, and that's all. It's the best I could do."

"But, Papa, it's delightful!"

The old gentleman was uncorking the champagne, quickly and handily, with a twist of the wires:

"Here goes, children!"

The wine frothed up high.

"Wait, Elly, wait, let me fill up your glass. . . . There, here's to you, children, and may you be happy!"

"You take after Lot," said Elly.

"I? In that case, Lot takes after me."

"Yes, I meant that of course."

"Ah, but it's quite a different thing!"

"Yes, but Lot . . . Lot is also like his mother."

"Yes, I'm like Mamma," said Lot.

He was short, slender, almost frail of build and fair; the old gentleman was solid in flesh and figure, with a fresh complexion and very thick grey hair, which still showed a few streaks of black.

"Yes, but I think Lot also has that flippancy of yours, though he is like his mother."

"Oh, so I'm flippant, am I?" said old Pauws, laughing.

His hands, moving in sweeping gestures, were busy across the table, with the hors d'œuvres, which he was now handing.

"Would you ever believe that Papa was seventy?" said Lot. "Papa, I'm amazed every time I see you! What keeps you so young?"

"I don't know, my boy; I'm built that way."

"Were you never afraid of getting old?"

"No, my dear fellow, I've never been afraid . . . of getting old or of anything else."

"Then whom do I get it from? Mamma hasn't that fear, not as I have it, although . . ."

"You're an artist; they have those queer ideas. I'm just ordinary."

"Yes, I wish I were like you, tall and broad-

shouldered. I'm always jealous when I look at you."

"Come, Lot, you're very well as you are!" said Elly, defending him against himself.

"If you were like me, you wouldn't have attracted your wife, what do you say, Elly?"

"Well, there's no telling, Papa!"

"How are things at home, my boy?"

"Same as usual, just the same."

"Is Mamma well?"

"Physically, yes. Morally, she's depressed . . . because I'm married."

"How do she and Steyn get on?"

"They quarrel."

"Ah, that mother of yours!" said Pauws. "Elly, will you help the mayonnaise? No, Lot, give me the Yquem: I'll open it. . . . That mother of yours has always quarrelled. Pity she had that in her. Temper, violent words . . . all about nothing: it was always like that in my time. And she was so nice otherwise . . . and so sweetly pretty!"

"Yes," said Lot, "and I'm like Mamma, an ugly edition."

"He doesn't mean a word of it," said Elly.

"No," said the old gentleman, "not a word of it, the conceited fellow!"

"All the same, I'd rather be like you, Papa."

"Lot, you're talking nonsense. . . . Some more mayonnaise, Elly? Sure? Then we'll see what the

cold chicken's made of. No, give it here, Lot, I'll carve. . . . And your wedding was very quiet? No religious ceremony?"

"No."

"No reception?"

"No, Elly has so few friends and I have so few, in Holland. We lead such a life of our own, at the Hague. I know more people in Italy than I do at the Hague. The whole family rather lives a life of its own. Except the D'Herbourgs there's really nobody."

"That's true."

"Those very old, old people are out of the question, of course."

"Yes, Grandpapa, Grandmamma. . . . And the old doctor. . . ."

"Uncle Anton lives his own life."

"H'm, h'm . . . yes. . . ."

"Uncle Harold is old also."

"Two years older than I."

"But he's poorly."

"Yes . . . and queer. Always has been. Quiet and melancholy. Still, a very good sort."

"We at home, with Steyn and Mamma: what's the use of our entertaining people?"

"You forget Aunt Stefanie: she's an aunt with money to leave, just as Uncle Anton is an uncle with money to leave; but your aunt has plenty."

"Oh, Lot is quite indifferent to what money he inherits!" said Elly.

"Besides, you two won't be badly off," said old Pauws. "You're right: what's the use of wedding-festivities? As for acquaintances . . ."

"We none of us have many."

"It's a funny thing. As a rule, there's such a lot of movement around Indian families. 'Swirl' we used to call it."

"Oh, I don't know: there's no 'swirl' of acquaintances round us!"

"No, we've had 'swirl' enough among ourselves: Mamma saw to that at least!"

"It made Mamma lose her friends too."

"Of course it did. Mamma's life has really been hardly decent . . . with her three husbands!"

"Well, of course. . . . I don't allow it to upset me. . . . But the family isn't thought much of."

"No. Grandmamma was the first to begin it. She also did just what she pleased. . . ."

"I've heard a lot of vague rumours. . . ."

"Well, I've heard a lot of rumours too, but they weren't vague. Grandmamma was a *grande coquette* in her day and inspired more than her share of the great passions in Java."

"They say that Mamma . . ."

"I don't know, but it's quite possible. At least, you two are so like each other that you might be brother and sister."

"Well, at the worst, we're cousins," said Elly.

"Yes, Grandmamma began it. . . . There was

a lot of talk. . . . Oh, those people are so old now! Their contemporaries are dead. And things pass. Who is there now to think and talk about things that are so long past?"

"Grandmamma's lovers?"

"Innumerable!"

"The doctor?"

"So they say. And Elly's grandpapa."

"Those old people!" said Elly.

"They were young once."

"And we shall be old one day," said Lot. "We're growing old as it is."

"Shut up, boy! There's time enough for that when you're seventy. . . . Yes, Grandmamma de Laders, Grandmamma Dercksz: I can remember her in India fifty years ago."

"O my God, what a time to remember things!" said Lot, shuddering.

"Take some more champagne, if it makes your flesh creep. . . . Fifty years ago, I was little more than a boy, I was twenty. Grandmamma was still a fine woman, well over forty. She became a widow quite young, on the death of her first husband. Well, let's see: when Dercksz was drowned, she was . . . about . . . thirty-six. . . . Then Mamma was born."

"What a long, long time ago that was!" said Lot. "It makes one giddy to look back upon."

"That's sixty, yes, sixty years ago now," said Pauws, dreamily. "I was a child then, ten years

old. I still remember the incident. I was at Semarang; my father was in the paymaster's department. My people knew the Derckszes. The thing was talked about. I was a child, but it made an impression on me. It was very much talked about, it was talked about for years and years after. There was a question of exhuming the body. They decided that it was too late. At that time, he had been buried for months. They said that . . ."

"That a native . . . with a kris . . . because of a woman . . . ?"

"Yes; and they said more than that. They said that Takma had been to the *pasangrahan* that evening and that Grandmamma. . . . But what's the use of talking about it? What can it matter to you? Elly's as white as a sheet—child, how pale you look!—and Lot is shivering all over his body, though it happened so long ago."

"Should you say that those old people . . . are hiding something?"

"Probably," said Pauws. "Come, let's have some champagne and not talk about it any more. They themselves have forgotten it all by this time. When you get as old as that . . ."

"You become dulled," said Lot.

"So you're going on to Paris to-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Shall you look up Aunt Thérèse?"

"Yes, I expect so," said Elly. "We mustn't behave quite like savages."

"And then?"

"We shall go to Nice."

"Oh, really? . . . And . . . and will you see Ottilie there?"

"Of course we shall," said Lot.

"That's right, that's right. . . . Yes, how can you expect a family like ours to keep up a circle of decent acquaintances? . . . Ottilie writes to me now and again. . . . She's living with an Italian. . . . Why they don't get married is more than I can make out."

"And why should they get married?" asked Lot.

"But, Lot," said Elly, "you and I did!"

"We are more conventional than Ottilie. I am more conventional than Ottilie ever was. I should never have dared to suggest to you *not* to get married. Ottilie is more thorough than I."

"She's a thorough fine girl . . . and a devilish handsome woman," said Pauws.

"Now *she's* like you."

"But a good-looking edition!" said the old gentleman, chaffingly. "Here, Elly, have some more *pâté*. But why they don't want to get married I can't and never shall make out. After all, we have all of us got married."

"But *how?*" said Lot.

"I must say you're not defending marriage very vigorously on your wedding-day!"

"Ottilie has seen so many unhappy marriages all around her."

"That's what she writes. But I don't consider that a reason. Hang it all, when a man falls in love, he goes and gets married! He gets married by the mayor and by the parson. . . . Yes, to tell you the truth, I think it was rather feeble of you two not to get married in church."

"But, Papa, you surely don't attach importance to having your marriage blessed by a parson!"

"No more I do, but still one does it. It's one of the things one does. We're not quite a law unto ourselves."

"No, but all social laws are being changed."

"Well, you can say what you please: I stick to it that you *have* to get married. By the mayor and by the parson. You two have been married by the mayor; but Ottilie refuses to be married at all. And I'm expected to think it natural and enlightened and I don't know what. I can't do it. I'm sorry for her sake. It's all very well: she's a great artist and can behave differently from an ordinary woman; but, if one fine day she returns to our ordinary circles, she'll find that she's made herself impossible. . . . How would you have friends and acquaintances gather round such a family?"

"They don't gather; and I'm glad of it. I have the most charming acquaintances in Italy, friends who . . ."

"Children, you may be right. Ottilie may be right not to get married at all; and you may be right to have been married only by the mayor."

"At any rate," said Elly, "I never thought that, though there was no reception, we should have such a cosy little supper."

"And such a nice one," said Lot. "Elly, these tarts are heavenly!"

"Only we oughtn't to have sat rooting up past things," said the old gentleman. "It makes Lot's flesh creep. Look at the fellow eating tarts! It's just what your mother used to do. A baby, a regular baby!"

"Yes, I'm a baby sometimes too, but not so much as Mamma."

"And is she going to England now?"

"She promised me not to. But her promise doesn't mean much. We shall be so long away; we shall be in Italy all through the winter. There's one thing makes me feel easier: Mamma has no money; and I went to the bank before I left and asked them, if Mamma came for money, to make up a story and persuade her that it couldn't be done, that there was no money. . . ."

"But she draws . . . she always did."

"The manager told me that he would help me, that he wouldn't let her have any money."

"Then she'll get it just the same."

"From whom?"

"I don't know, but she'll get it. She always gets it, I don't know how. . . ."

"But, Papa!"

"Yes, my boy, you can be as indignant as you

please: I am speaking from experience. How often haven't I had questions about money with Mamma! First there was none; and then, all of a sudden, there it was! . . ."

"Mamma is bad at figures and she is untidy. Then she finds some money in her cupboard."

"Yes, I know all about it: in the old days she was always finding something in her cupboard. A good thing, that she goes on finding it. Still, we should never have parted because of money. If it hadn't been for that damned Trevelley, we might still . . . But, when Mamma had once set her heart on anybody, then . . . Don't let's talk about it. . . . Look here, you know this old photograph. It's charming, isn't it, Elly? Yes, that's how she used to look. I've never been able to forget her. I've never loved any one else. I'm an old fellow now, children, but . . . but I believe that I'm still fond of her. . . . I sometimes think that it's past, that it's all past and done with; and yet, sometimes, old as I am, I still suffer from it and feel rotten. . . . I believe I'm still fond of her. . . . And, if Mamma had had a different character and a different temper and if she hadn't met Trevelley . . . But there are so very many 'ifs' in the case. . . . And, if she hadn't met Trevelley, she would have met Steyn just the same. . . . She would always have met somebody. . . . Come, Elly, pour out the coffee. Will you have chartreuse or benedictine? And stay on and talk a bit, cosily. Not

about old things: about young things, young things; about yourselves, your plans, Italy. . . . It's not late yet; it's barely half-past ten. . . . But, of course, you're only this moment married. . . . Well, I'll see you to your hotel. . . . Shall we walk? It's no distance. . . . Let your old father see you to your hotel and give you a good-night kiss at the door and wish you happiness, every happiness . . . . dear children!"

CHAPTER XIII

THEY had now been a few days in Paris; and Elly, who was seeing Paris for the first time, was enchanted. The Louvre, the Cluny, the life in the streets and the cafés, the theatres in the evenings almost drove Aunt Thérèse from her mind.

"Oh, don't let's go to her!" said Lot, one morning, as they were walking along the boulevards. "Perhaps she doesn't even know who we are."

Elly felt a twinge of conscience:

"She wrote me a very nice letter on my engagement and she gave us a wedding-present. Yes, Lot, she knows quite well who we are."

"But she doesn't know that we're in Paris. Don't let's go to her. Aunt Thérèse: I haven't seen her for years, but I remember her long ago . . . at the time of Mamma's last marriage. I was a boy of eighteen then. Aunt Thérèse must have been forty-eight. A handsome woman. She was even more like Grandmamma than Mamma is: she had all that greatness and grandness and majesty which you see in the earlier portraits of Grandmamma and which she still has when she sits enthroned in her chair. . . . It always impresses me. . . . Very slender and handsome and elegant . . . calm and

restful, distinguished-looking, with a delightful smile."

"The smile of *La Gioconda*. . . ."

"The smile of *La Gioconda*," Lot repeated, laughing because of his wife, who was enjoying herself so in Paris. "But by the way, Elly . . . the Venus of Milo: I couldn't tell you so when we were standing there, because you were in such silent rapture, but . . . after I hadn't seen her for years, I found her such a disappointment. Only imagine . . ."

"Well, what, Lot?"

"I thought her grown old!"

"But, Lot! . . ."

"I assure you, I thought her grown old! Does everything grow old then, do even the immortals grow old? I remember her as she used to be: calm, serene, imposing, white as snow, in spite of her mutilation, against a brilliant background of dark-red velvet. This time I thought her no longer imposing, no longer white as snow; she seemed pathetically crippled; and the velvet background was no longer brilliant. Everything had grown old and dull and I had a shock and felt very sad. . . . Soberly speaking, I think now that they ought just to clean her down one morning and renew the velvet hanging; and then, on a sunny day, if I was in a good mood, I daresay I should think her serene and white as snow again. But, as she showed herself to me, I thought her grown old; and it gave

me a shock. It upset me for quite an hour, but I didn't let you see it. . . . For that matter, I think Paris altogether has grown very old: so dirty, so old-fashioned, so provincial; a conglomeration of *quartiers* and small towns huddled together; and so exactly the same as it was fifteen years ago, but older, grimier and more old-fashioned. Look! This papier-mâché chicken here"—they were in the Avenue de l'Opéra—"has been turning on that spit, as an advertisement, with the oily butter dripping from it: Elly, that chicken has been turning for fifteen years! And last night, at the Théâtre Français, I had a shock, just as I did to-day at the Venus of Milo. The Théâtre Français had grown so old, so old, with that dreadful ranting, that I asked myself, 'Was it always so old, or do I think it old because I am older myself?' . . . ."

"But Aunt Thérèse . . ."

"So you insist on going to her. . . . Really, we'd better not. She too has grown old; and what are we to her? . . . We are young still. . . . I also am young still, am I not? . . . You don't think me too old, your *blasé* husband? . . . In Italy, we shall find real enjoyment. . . ."

"Why, everything will be still older there!"

"Yes, but everything is not *growing* older. That's all past, it's all *the* past. It's the obvious past and therefore it's so restful. It's all dead."

"But surely the country is alive? . . . Modern life goes on? . . ."

"I don't care about that. All that I see is the past; and that is so beautifully, so restfully dead. That doesn't sadden me. What saddens me is the old people and the old things that are still alive and ever so old and have gradually, gradually gone past us; but things which are restfully dead and which are so exquisitely beautiful as in Italy, they don't sadden me: they calm me and rouse my admiration for everything that was once so beautifully alive and is still so beautiful in death. Paris saddens me, because the city is dying, as all France is; Rome exhilarates me: the city, what *I* see of it, *is* dead; and I feel myself young in it still and still alive; and that makes me glad, selfishly glad, while at the same time I admire the dead, calm beauty."

"So that will be the subject of your next essay."

"Now you're teasing! If I can't talk without being accused of essay-writing . . . I'll hold my tongue."

"Don't be so cross. . . . Now what about Aunt Thérèse?"

"We won't go. . . . Well, talk of the devil! Goodness gracious, how small Paris is! A village!"

"Why, what is it, Lot?"

"There's Theo! Theo van der Staff!"

"Theo, Aunt Thérèse's son?"

"Yes. Hullo, Theo! How are you? . . . How funny that we should meet you! . . ."

"I didn't know you were in Paris. . . . Are you on your honeymoon?"

He was a fat little man of over forty, with a round face containing a pair of small, sparkling eyes: they leered at Elly with an almost irresistible curiosity to see the young wife, married but a few days since. A sensuality ever seeking physical enjoyment surrounded him as with a warm atmosphere, jovial and engaging, as though he would invite them presently to come and have a nice lunch with him in a good restaurant and to go on somewhere afterwards. His long residence abroad had imparted a something to his clothes, a something to his speech and gestures that lightened his native Dutch heaviness, rather comically, it is true, because he remained a little elephantine in his grace. Yet his ears pricked up like a satyr's; and his eyes sparkled; and his laughing lips swelled thickly, as though with Indian blood; and his small, well-kept teeth glistened in between. When a woman passed, his quick glance undressed her in a twinkling; and he seemed to reflect, for a second or two.

"We were just speaking of your mother, Theo. Funny that we should meet you," Lot repeated.

"I walk down the boulevards every morning, so it's very natural that we should meet. I'm glad to have the opportunity of congratulating you. . . . Mamma? She's all right, I believe."

"Haven't you seen her lately?"

"I haven't seen her for a week. Are you going to call on her? Then I may as well come too. Shall we have a good lunch somewhere afterwards,

or shall I be in the way? If not, come and lunch with me. Not in one of your big restaurants, which everybody knows, but at a place where *I'll* take you: quite a small place, but exquisite. They have a *homard à l'américaine* that's simply heavenly!" And he kissed the tips of his fat fingers. "Do you want to go to Mamma's at once? Very well, we'll take a carriage, for she lives a long way off."

He stopped a cab and gave the address:

"*Cent-vingt-cing,* Rue Madame."

And he gallantly helped Elly in, then Lot, insisted upon himself taking the little back seat and sat like that, with one foot on the step of the carriage. He enquired conventionally and indifferently after the relations at the Hague, as after strangers whom he had seen once or twice. In the Rue Madame the driver pulled up outside a gate of tall railings, with a fence of boards behind it, so that no one could see in.

"This is the convent where Mamma lives," said Theo.

They stepped out and Theo rang. A sister opened the gate, said that Mme. van der Staff was at home and led the way across the courtyard. The convent belonged to the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady of Lourdes; and Aunt Thérèse boarded there, together with a few other pious old ladies. The sister showed them into a small parlour on the ground-floor and opened the shutters. On

the mantelpiece stood a statue of the Blessed Virgin between two candelabra; there were a sofa and a few chairs in white loose covers.

"Is Reverend Mother at home, sister?" asked Theo.

"Yes, monsieur."

"Would it be convenient for her to see me? Will you tell her that I have come to call on her?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The sister left the room. Theo gave a wink:

"I ought to have done that long ago," he said. "I am seizing the opportunity. The reverend mother is a sensible woman, twice as sensible as Mamma."

They waited. It was cold and shivery in the bare parlour. Lot shuddered and said:

"I couldn't do it. No, I couldn't do it."

"No more could I," said Theo.

The reverend mother was the first to enter: a short woman, lost in the spacious folds of her habit. Two brown eyes gleamed from under the white band over her forehead.

"M. van der Staff . . ."

"Madame . . ."

He pressed her hand:

"I have long been wanting to come and see you, to tell you how grateful I am for the care which you bestow upon my mother."

His French sentences sounded polite, gallant and courteous.

"May I introduce my cousins, M. and Mme. Pauws?"

"Newly married, I believe," said the reverend mother, bowing, with a little smile.

Lot was surprised that she should know:

"We have come to pay my aunt a visit . . . and you too, madame la supérieure," he added, courteously.

"Pray sit down. Madame will be here at once."

"Is Mamma quite well?" asked Theo. "I haven't seen her . . . for some time."

"She's very well," said the reverend mother. "Because we look after her."

"I know you do."

"She won't look after herself. As you know, she goes to extremes. *Le bon Dieu* doesn't expect us to go to such extremes as madame does. I don't pray a quarter as much as madame. Madame is *always* praying. I shouldn't have time for it. *Le bon Dieu* doesn't expect it. We have our work; I have my nursing-institute, which keeps us very busy. At this moment, nearly all the sisters are out nursing. Then I have my servants' registry-office. We *can't* always be praying."

"Mamma can," said Theo, with a laugh.

"Madame prays *too much,*" said the reverend mother. "Madame is an *enthousiaste* . . ."

"Always was, in everything she did," said Theo, staring in front of him.

"And she has remained so. She is an *enthousiaste*

in her new creed, in our religion. But she oughn't to go to extremes . . . or to fast unnecessarily. . . . The other day we found her fainting in the chapel. . . . And we have our little *trucs:* when it is not absolutely necessary to fast, we give her *bouillon* in her *soupe-maigre* or over her vegetables, without her noticing it. . . . Here is madame. . . ."

The door was opened by a sister; and Mrs. van der Staff, Aunt Thérèse, entered the room. And it seemed to Lot as though he saw Grandmamma herself walk in, younger, but still an old woman. Dressed in a smooth black gown, she was tall and majestic and very slender, with a striking grace in her movements. Grandmamma must have been just like that. A dream hovered over her dark eyes, which had remained the eyes of a creole, and it seemed as if she had a difficulty in seeing through the dream; but the mouth, old as it now was, had a natural smile, with ecstasy playing around it. She accepted Theo's kiss and said to Lot and Elly, in French:

"It's very nice of you to look me up. I'm very grateful to you. . . . So this is Elly? I saw you years ago, in Holland, at Grandpapa Takma's. You were a little girl of fourteen then. It's very nice of you to come. Sit down. I never go to Holland now . . . but I often think, I very often think . . . of my relations. . . ."

The dream hovered over her eyes; ecstasy played

around her smile. She folded her thin hands in her lap; and their fingers were slender and wand-like, like Grandmamma's. Her voice sounded like Grandmamma's. As she sat there, in her black gown, in the pale light of that convent-parlour, permeated with a chilliness that was likewise pale, the resemblance was terrifying: this daughter appeared to be one and the same as her mother, seemed to be that mother herself; and it was as though bygone years had returned in a wonderful, haunting, pale, white light.

"And how are they all at the Hague?" asked Aunt Thérèse.

A few words were exchanged about the members of the family. Soon the reverend mother rose discreetly, said good-bye, expressed her thanks for the visit.

"How is Uncle Harold? . . . And how is Mamma, Charles? I very often think of her. I often pray for Mamma, Charles. . . ."

Her voice, long cracked, sounded softer than pure Dutch and was mellow with its creole accent; both Lot and Elly were touched by a certain tenderness in that cracked voice, while Theo stared painfully in front of him: he felt depressed and constrained in his mother's presence.

"It is nice of you not to forget us," Lot ventured to say.

"I shall never forget your mother," said Aunt Thérèse. "I never see her now and perhaps I

shall never see her again. But I am very, very fond of her . . . and I pray, I often pray for her. She needs it. We all need it. I pray for all of them . . . for all the family. They all need it. And I also pray for Mamma, for Grandmamma. And, Elly, I pray for Grandpapa too. . . . I have been praying now for years, I have been praying for quite thirty years. God is sure to hear my prayers. . . ."

It was difficult to say anything; and Elly merely took Aunt's hand and pressed it. Aunt Thérèse lifted Elly's face a little by the chin, looked at it attentively, then looked at Lot. She was struck by a resemblance, but said nothing.

She knew. Aunt Thérèse knew. She never went to Holland now and she expected that probably she would never again see her sister, whom she knew to be Takma's child, never again see Takma, never again her mother. But she prayed, especially for those old people, because she knew. She, who had once, like her mother, been a woman of society and a woman of passion, with a creole's heart that loved and hated fervently, had learnt from her mother's own lips, in violent attacks of fever, the Thing which she had since known. She had seen her mother see—though she herself had not seen—she had seen her mother see the spectre looming in the corner of the room. She had heard her mother beg for mercy and for an end to her punishment. She had not, as had Harold Dercksz, seen the

Thing sixty years ago, but she had known it for thirty years. And the knowledge had given a permanent shock to her nervous and highly-strung soul; and, after being the creole, the woman of passionate love and hatred, the woman of adventures, the woman who loved and afterwards hated those whom she had loved, she had sunk herself in contemplation, had bathed in ecstasy, which shone down upon her from the celestial panes of the church-windows; and one day, in Paris, she had gone to a priest and said:

"Father, I want to pray. I feel drawn towards your faith. I wish to become a Catholic. I have wished it for months."

She had become a Catholic and now she prayed. She prayed for herself, but she prayed even more for her mother. All her highly-strung soul went up in prayer for that mother whom she would probably never see again, but through whom she suffered and whom she hoped to redeem from sin and save from too horrible a punishment hereafter; that mother who had prevented *him,* her father, from defending himself, by clinging to him until the other man had snatched the weapon from the clenched hand that was seeking revenge in blood-maddened rage. . . . She knew. Aunt Thérèse knew. And she prayed, she always prayed. Never could too many prayers rise to Heaven to implore mercy.

"Mamma," said Theo, "the reverend mother

told me that you have fainted in chapel. And that you don't eat."

"Yes, I eat, I eat," said Aunt Thérèse, softly and slowly. "Don't make yourself uneasy, Theo."

A contempt for her son embittered the smile on her old lips; her voice, in addressing her son, grew cold and hard, as though she, the woman of constant prayer, suddenly became once more towards her son the former woman, who had loved and afterwards hated that son's father, the father who was not her husband.

"I eat," said Aunt Thérèse. "Indeed, I eat too much. Those good sisters! They sometimes forget when we have to fast; and they give me meat. Then I take it and give it to my poor. . . . Tell me more, children, tell me more about the Hague. I have a few moments left. Then I must go to the chapel. I say my prayers with the sisters."

And she asked after everybody, all the brothers and sisters and their children:

"I pray for all of them," she said. "I shall pray for you also, children."

A restlessness overcame her and she listened for a sound in the passage. Theo winked at Lot and they rose to their feet.

"No," Aunt Thérèse assured them, "I shall not forget you. Send me your photographs, won't you?"

They promised.

"Where is your sister, Charles?"

"At Nice, Aunt."

"Send me her photograph. I pray for her too. Good-bye, children, good-bye, dear children."

She took leave of Lot and Elly and went away in a dream and forgot to notice Theo. He shrugged his shoulders. The chant of a litany came from the chapel, which occupied a larger room opposite the little parlour.

They met the reverend mother in the passage; she was on her way to the chapel:

"How did you find your aunt?" she whispered. "Going to extremes, I expect: yes, she does go to extremes. Look! . . ."

And she made Elly, Lot and Theo peep through the door of the chapel. The sisters, kneeling on the praying-chairs, were chanting their prayers. On the floor, between the chairs, lay Aunt Thérèse, prostrate at full length, with her face hidden in her hands.

"Look!" said the reverend mother, with a frown. "Even *we* don't do that. It is unnecessary. It is not even *convenable*. I shall have to tell monsieur le directeur, so that he may speak to madame about it. I shall certainly tell him. *Au revoir, madame, au revoir, messieurs*. . . ."

She bowed, like a woman of the world, with a smile and an air of calm distinction.

A sister saw them to the gate, let them out. . . .

"Oof!" sighed Theo. "I've performed my filial duty once more for a few months."

"I could not do it," muttered Lot. "I simply couldn't."

Elly said nothing. Her eyes were wide-open and staring. She understood devotion and she understood vocation; though she understood differently, where she was concerned, yet she understood.

"And now for the *homard à l'américaine!*" cried Theo.

And, as he hailed a carriage, it was as though his fat body became relaxed, simply from breathing the fresh, free air.

CHAPTER XIV

In the night express, the young wife sat thinking. Lot lay asleep, with a rug over him, in one corner of the carriage, but the little bride could not sleep, for an autumnal wind was howling along the train; and so she just sat silently, in the other corner, thinking. She had now given her life to another and hoped for happiness. She hoped that she had a vocation and that she would have devotion to bestow. That was happiness; there was nothing else; and Aunt Thérèse was right, even though she, Elly, conceived devotion, happiness and vocation so very differently. She wanted more than the feeling, the thought; she wanted, above all, action. Even as she had always given herself to action, though it was only tennis at first—and sculpture later and in the end the pouring out of her own sorrow in words and the sending of it to an editor, to a publisher—so she now longed to devote herself to action, or at least to active collaboration. She looked wistfully at Lot and felt that she loved him, however differently it might be from the way in which she had loved the first time. She loved him less for her own sake, as when she had been in love before, and loved him more for his sake, to rouse him to great things. It was all very vague, but there was

ambition in it and ambition, springing from love, for his sake. What a pity that he should fritter away his talent in witty little articles and hastily-written essays. That was like his conversation, light and amusing, unconvinced and unconvincing; and he could do better than that, much better. Perhaps writing a novel was also not the great thing; perhaps the great thing *was* writing, but not a novel. What then? She sought and did not yet find, but knew for certain—or thought she knew—that she *would* find and that she would rouse Lot. . . . Yes, they would be happy, they would continue happy. . . . Out there, in Italy, she would find it. She would find it in the past, in history, perhaps; in things that were past, in beautiful noble things that were dead, peacefully dead and still beautiful. . . . Then why did she feel so melancholy? Or was it only the melancholy which she had always felt, so vaguely, and which was as a malady underlying all her activity and which broke in the inflection of her quick, voluble voice: the melancholy because her youth, as a child without parents, brothers or sisters, had bloomed so quietly in the old man's big house. He had always been kind and full of fatherly care for her; but he was so old and she had felt the pressure of his old years. She had always had old people around her, for, as far back as she could remember anything, she remembered old Grandmamma Dercksz and Dr. Roelofsz: she knew them, old even then, from

the time when she was a little child. Lot also, she thought—though the life of a man, who went about and travelled, was different from that of a girl, who stayed at home—Lot also had felt the pressure of all that old age around him; and that, no doubt, was the reason why his dread of growing old had developed into a sort of nervous obsession. Aunt Stefanie and the uncles at the Hague were old and their friends and acquaintances seemed to have died out and they moved about, without contemporaries, a little lonesomely in that town, along the streets where their houses were, to and fro, to and fro among one another. . . . It was so forlorn and so very lonely; and it engendered melancholy; and she had always felt that melancholy in her youth. . . . She had never been able to keep her girl-friends. She no longer saw the girls of the tennis-club; her fellow-pupils at the Academy she just greeted with a hurried nod when she passed them in the street. After her unfortunate engagement, she had withdrawn herself more than ever, except that she was always with Lot, walking with him, talking to him; he also was lonely at the Hague, with no friends: he was better off for friends, he said, in Italy. . . . How strange, that eternal loneliness and sense of extinction around both of them! No friends or acquaintances around them, as around most people, as around most families. It was doubtless because of the oppression of those two very old people; but she could not analyse

beyond that and she felt that something escaped her which she did not know, but which was nevertheless there and pressed upon her and kept other people away: something gloomy, now past, which remained hovering around the old man and the old woman and which enveloped the others—the old woman's children, the old man's only grandchild—in a sort of haze, something indescribable but so definitely palpable that she could almost have taken hold of it by putting out her hand. . . .

It was all very vague and misty to think about, it was not even possible to think about it; it was a perception of something chill, that passed, nothing more, no more than that; but it sometimes prevented her breathing freely, taking pleasure in her youth, walking fast, speaking loud: when she did that, she had to force herself with an effort. And she knew that Lot felt the same: she had understood it from two or three very vague words and more from the spirit of those words than from their sound; and it had given her a great soul-sympathy for Lot. He was a strange fellow, she thought, looking at him as he slept. Outwardly and in his little external qualities and habits, he was a very young boy, a child sometimes, she thought, with round his childishness a mood of disillusionment that sometimes uttered itself quite wittily but did not ring sincere; beneath the exterior lay a disposition to softness, a considerable streak of selfishness and a neurotic preoccupation where he was

himself concerned, tempered by something that was almost strength of character in dealing with his mother, for he was the only one who could get on with Mamma. With this temperament he possessed natural gifts which he did not value, though it was really necessary for him to work. He presented a medley of contradictions, of seriousness and childishness, of feeling and indifference, of manliness and of very feeble weakness, such as she had never seen in any man. He was vainer of his fair hair than of his talent, though he was vain of this too; and a compliment on his tie gave him more pleasure than a word of praise for his finest essay. And this child, this boy, this man she loved: she considered it strange when she herself thought of it, but she loved him and was happy only when he was with her.

He woke up, asked her why she was not sleeping and now took her head on his breast. Tired by the train and by her thoughts, she fell asleep; and he looked out at the grey dawn, which broke over the bleak and chilly fields after they had passed Lyons. He yearned for sea, for blue sky, for heat, for everything that was young and alive: the South of France, the Riviera and then Italy, with Elly. He had disposed of his life and he hoped for happiness, happiness in companionship of thought and being, because loneliness induces melancholy and makes us think the more intensely of our slow decay. . . .

"She is very charming," he thought, as he looked down upon her where she slept on his breast; and he resisted the impulse to kiss her now that she had just fallen asleep. "She is very charming and she has a delicate artistic sense. I must tell her to start modelling again . . . or to write something: she's good at both. That was a very fine little book of hers, even though it is so very subjective and a great deal too feminine. There is much that is good in life, even though life is nothing but a transition which can't signify much in a world that's rotten. There must be other lives and other worlds. A time must come when there will be no material suffering, at most a spiritual suffering. Then all our material anxieties will be gone. . . . And yet there is a great charm about this material life . . . if we forget all wretchedness for a moment. A spell of charm comes to everybody: I believe that mine has come. If it would only remain like this; but it won't. Everything changes. . . . . Better not think about it, but work instead: better do some work, even while travelling. Elly would like it. At Florence, the Medicis; in Rome, the whole papacy. . . . I don't know which I shall select: it must be one of the two. But there's such a lot of it, such a lot of it. . . . Could I write a fine history of civilization, I wonder? . . . I hate collecting notes: all those rubbishy odds and ends of paper. . . . If I can't see the whole thing before me, in one clear vision, it's no good. I can't

study: I have to see, to feel, to admire or shudder. If I don't do that, I'm no good. An essay is what I'm best at. A word is a butterfly: you just catch it, lightly, by the wings . . . and let it fly away again. . . . Serious books on history and art are like fat beetles, crawling along. . . . *Tiens!* That's not a bad conceit. I must use it one day in an article: the butterfly wafted on the air . . . and the heavy beetle. . . ."

They were approaching Marseilles; they would be at Nice by two o'clock in the afternoon.

CHAPTER XV

Lot had ordered a bedroom in the Hôtel de Luxembourg and had written to his sister Ottilie. On arriving, they found a basket of red roses awaiting them in their room. It was October; the windows were open; and the sea shone with a dark metallic gleam in a violent flood of sunlight and rippled under the insolent forward thrusts of a gathering mistral.

They had a bath, lunched in their bedroom, feeling a little tired after the journey; and the scent of the roses, the brightness of the sun, the deepening turquoise of the sky and the more and more foam-flecked steel of the sea intoxicated both of them. The salad of tomatoes and capsicums made a red-and-orange patch around the chicken on the table; and long pearls seemed to melt in their glasses of champagne. The wind rose in mighty gusts and with its arrogant, brutal, male caresses swept away any haze that still hung around. The glowing sun poured forth its flood as from a golden spout in the turquoise sky.

They sat side by side, intoxicated with it all, and ate and drank but did not speak. A sense of peace permeated them, accompanied by a certain slackness, as though in surrender to the forces of life,

which were so turbulent and so violent and so radiantly gold and insolently red.

There was a knock; and a woman's head, crowned with a large black hat, appeared through the open door:

"May I come in?"

"Ottilie!" cried Lot, springing up. "Come in, come in!"

She entered:

"Welcome! Welcome to Nice! I haven't seen you for ages, Lot! Elly, my sister, welcome! . . . Yes, I sent the roses. I'm glad you wrote to me . . . and that you are willing to see me and that your wife is too. . . ."

She sat down, accepted a glass of champagne; cordial greetings passed between Lot and his sister. Ottilie was a couple of years older than Lot; she was Mamma's eldest child and resembled both her father, Pauws, and Mamma, for she was tall, with her father's masterful ways, but had Mamma's features, her clear profile and delicate chin, though not her eyes. But her many years of public appearances had given her movements a graceful assurance, that of a talented and beautiful woman, accustomed to being looked at and applauded, something quite different from any sort of ordinary, domestic attractiveness: the harmonious, almost sculptural gestures, after being somewhat studied at first, had in course of time become natural. . . .

"What a good-looking woman!" thought Elly;

and she felt herself to be nobody, small, insignificant, in the simple wrap which she had put on hurriedly after her bath.

Ottilie, who was forty-one, looked no more than thirty and had the youthfulness of an artist who keeps her body young by means of an art and science of beauty unknown to the ordinary woman. A white-cloth gown, which avoided the last extravagances of fashion, gave her figure the perfection of a statue and revealed the natural outlines of arms and bosom beneath the modern dress. The great black hat circled its black ostrich-feather around her copper-glowing fair hair, which was plaited in a heavy coil; a wide grey boa hung in a light cloud of ostrich-feathers around her; and, in those colourless tints—white, black and grey—she remained, notwithstanding her almost too great beauty, attractive at once as a well-bred woman and an artist.

"Well, that's my sister, Elly!" said Lot, proudly. "What do you think of her?"

"I've seen you before, Elly, at the Hague," said Ottilie.

"I don't remember, Ottilie."

"No, you were a little girl of eight, or nine perhaps; and you had a big playroom at Grandpapa Takma's and a lovely doll's-house. . . ."

"So I did."

"I haven't been to the Hague since."

"You went to the Conservatoire at Liège?"

"Yes."

"When did you sing last?" asked Lot.

"In Paris not long ago."

"We hear nothing of you. You never sing in Holland."

"No, I don't ever go to Holland."

"Why not, Ottilie?" asked Elly.

"I have always felt depressed in Holland."

"Because of the country or the people?"

"Because of everything: the country, the people, the houses . . . the family . . . our circle. . . ."

"I quite understand," said Lot.

"I couldn't breathe," said Ottilie. "It's not that I want to run the country down, or the people or the family. It all has its good side. But, just as the grey skies hindered me from breathing, so the houses hindered me from producing my voice properly; and there was something around me, I don't know what, that struck me as terrible."

"Something that struck you as terrible?" said Elly.

"Yes, an atmosphere of sorts. At home, I could never get on with Mamma, any more than Papa and Mamma could ever get on together. Mamma's impossible little babyish character, with her little fits of temper, used to drive me wild. Lot has a more accommodating nature than I! . . . ."

"You ought to have been a boy and I a girl," said Lot, almost bitterly.

"*Mais je suis très femme, moi,*" said Ottilie.

Her eyes grew soft and filmy and happiness lurked in her smile.

"*Mais je te crois,*" replied Lot.

"No," continued Ottilie, "I couldn't hit it off with Mamma. Besides, I felt that I must be free. After all, there was life. I felt my voice inside me. I studied hard and seriously, for years on end. And I made a success. All my life is given to singing. . . ."

"Why do you only sing at concerts, Ottilie? Don't you care about opera? You sing Wagner, I know."

"Yes, but I can't lose myself in a part for more than a few moments, not for more than a single scene, not for a whole evening."

"Yes, I can imagine that," said Lot.

"Yes," said Elly, with quick understanding, "you're a sister of Lot's in that. He can't work either for longer than his essay or his article lasts."

"A family weakness, Ottilie," said Lot. "Inherited."

Ottilie reflected, with a smile: the Gioconda smile, Elly thought.

"That may be true," said Ottilie. "It was a shrewd observation of your little Elly's."

"Yes," said Lot, proudly. "She's very observant. Not one of our three natures is what you would call commonplace."

"Ah," murmured Ottilie, "Holland . . .

those houses . . . those people! . . . Mamma and 'Mr.' Trevelley at home: it was terrible. One scene after the other. Trevelley reproaching Mamma with Papa, Mamma reproaching Trevelley with a hundred infidelities! Mamma was jealousy incarnate. She used to keep her hat and cloak hanging in the hall. If 'Mr.' Trevelley went out, Mamma would say, 'Hugh, where are you going?' 'Doesn't matter to you,' said Trevelley. 'I'm coming with you,' said Mamma, putting on her hat all askew and flinging on her cloak; and go with him she did. Trevelley cursed and swore; there was a scene; but Mamma went with him: he walking along the street two yards in front of her, Mamma following, mad with rage. . . . She was very, very pretty in those days, a little doll, with a fair-haired Madonna face, but badly dressed. . . . Lot was always quiet, with calm, tired-looking eyes: how well I remember it all! He was never out of temper, always polite to 'Mr.' Travelley. . . ."

"I have managed to get on with all my three papas."

"When Mamma and Trevelley had had enough of each other and Mamma fell in love with Steyn, I cleared out. I went first to Papa and then to the Conservatoire. And I haven't been back in Holland since. . . . Oh, those houses! . . . Your house, Elly—Grandpapa Takma's house—everything very neatly kept by Aunt Adèle, but it seemed to me as if something stood waiting behind every

door. . . . Grandmamma's house and Grandmamma's figure, as she sat at the window there staring . . . and waiting, she too. Waiting what for? I don't know. But it did depress me so. I longed for air, for blue sky, for freedom; I had to expand my lungs."

"I have felt like that too sometimes," said Lot, half to himself.

Elly said nothing, but she thought of her childhood, spent with the old man, and of her doll's-house, which she ruled so very seriously, as if it had been a little world.

"Yes, Lot," said Ottilie, "you felt it too: you went off to Italy to breathe again, to live, to live. . . . In our family, they *had* lived. Mamma *still* lived, but her own past clung to her. . . . I don't know, Elly; I don't think I'm very sensitive; and yet . . . and yet I did feel it so: an oppression of things of the past all over one. I couldn't go on like that. I longed for my own life."

"That's true," said Lot, "you released yourself altogether. More so than I did. I was never able to leave Mamma for good. I'm fond of her. I don't know why: she has not been much of a mother to me. Still I'm fond of her, I often feel sorry for her. She is a child, a spoilt child. She was overwhelmed, in her youth, with one long adoration. The men were mad on her. Now she is old and what has she left? Nothing and nobody. Steyn and she lead a cat-and-dog life. I pity Steyn, but

I sometimes feel for Mamma. It's a dreadful thing to grow old, especially for the sort of woman that she was, a woman—one may as well speak plainly —who lived for her passions. Mamma has never had anything in her but love. She is an elementary woman; she needs love and caresses, so much so that she has not been able to observe the conventions. She respected them only to a certain point. When she fell in love, everything else went by the board."

"But why did she marry? *I* didn't marry! And I am in love too."

"Ottilie, Mamma lived in a different social period. People used to marry then. They marry still, for the most part. Elly and I got married."

"I have nothing to say against it, if you know that you have found each other for life. Did Mamma know that with any of her husbands? She was mad on all the three of them."

"She now hates them all."

"Therefore she ought not to have married."

"No, but she lived in a different social period. And, as I say, Ottilie, people still get married."

"You disapprove of my not marrying."

"I don't disapprove. It's not my nature to disapprove of what other people think best in their own judgment."

"Let us talk openly and frankly. You call Mamma a woman who lives for her passions. Perhaps you call me the same."

"I don't know much about your life."

"I have lived with men. If I had had Mamma's ideas, or rather her unconscious conventions, I should have married them. I loved and was loved. Twice I could have married, as Mamma did; but I didn't do it."

"You were disheartened by what you had seen."

"Yes; and I didn't know, I never knew. Perhaps now, Lot, perhaps now I feel certain for the first time."

"Do you feel certain, Ottilie?" said Elly.

She took Ottilie's hand. She thought Ottilie so beautiful, so very beautiful and so genuine that she was greatly affected by her.

"Perhaps, Elly, I now know for certain that I shall never love any one else as I love Aldo. . . . He loves me . . ."

"And you will get married?" asked Lot.

"No, we shall not get married."

"Why not? . . ."

"Is *he* certain?"

"But you say he's fond of you."

"Yes, but is he *certain?* No, he is not. We are happy together, ever so happy. He wants to marry me. But is he certain? No, he is not. He is not certain: I know for certain that he does not know for certain. . . . Why should we bind ourselves with legal ties? If I have a child by him, I shall be very happy and shall be a good mother to my

child. But why those legal ties? . . . Aldo isn't *certain,* happy though he may be. He is two years older than I. Who knows what may be waiting for him to-morrow, what emotion, what passion, what love? . . . I myself know that I have found, but I know that he does *not* know. . . . If he leaves me to-morrow, he is free. Then he can find another happiness, perhaps the lasting one. . . . What do we poor creatures know? . . . We seek and seek until suddenly we find certainty. *I* have found it. But *he* has not. . . . No, Lot, we shall not get married. I want Aldo to be free and to do as he pleases. I am no longer young and I want to leave him free. Our love, our bodies, our souls are free, absolutely free, in our happiness. And, if I am old to-morrow, an old woman, with no voice left . . ."

"Then you will pay the penalty, Ottilie," said Lot.

"Then I shall pay no penalty, Lot. Then I shall have been happy. Then I shall have had my portion. I don't ask for eternity here below. I shall be satisfied and I shall grow old, quietly, quietly old. . . ."

"Oh, Ottilie, and *I* . . . I suffer from growing old, from growing older."

"Lot, that's a disease. You're happy now, you have Elly, life is beautiful, there is sunshine, there is happiness. Take all that, enjoy it and be happy and don't think of what is to come."

"Don't you then ever think of growing old and of the horror of it?"

"I do think of growing old, but I don't see anything horrible in it."

"If Aldo were to leave you to-morrow, you would be alone . . . and you would grow old."

"If Aldo left me to-morrow, for his own happiness, I should think it right and I should grow old, but I should not be alone, for I should have all my memories of his love and of our happiness, which is actual now and so real that there can be nothing else after it."

She got up.

"Are you going?"

"I have to. Come and lunch with us to-morrow. Will you come, Elly?"

"Thanks, Ottilie."

Ottilie looked out of the window. The sun beamed as it died away, from behind mauve and rose clouds, and the wind had subsided on the waves: the sea just rocked it softly on her rolling, deep-blue bosom, like a gigantic lover who lay resting in her lap after his spell of blazing ardour.

"How splendid those clouds are!" said Elly. "The wind has gone down."

"Always does, at this time," said Ottilie. "Look, Lot, there he is!"

"Who?"

"Aldo. He's waiting for me."

They saw a man sitting on the Promenade des

Anglais—there were not many people about—and looking at the sea.

"I can only see his back," said Lot.

"You shall see him to-morrow. I'm delighted that you're coming."

Her voice sounded grateful, as though she were touched. She kissed them both and went away.

"Heavens, what a beautiful woman!" said Lot. "She is anything but young, but years don't count with a woman accustomed to appear in public and as handsome as she is. . . ."

Elly had gone out on the balcony:

"Oh, Lot, what a glorious sunset! . . . It's like a fairy-picture in the sky. That's how I imagine the atmosphere of the Arabian Nights. Look, it's just like the tail of a gigantic phoenix vanishing behind the mountains in flames. . . . There's Ottilie, on the promenade; she's waving her handkerchief."

"And there's Aldo, with her, bowing. . . . A fine good-looking fellow, that Italian officer of hers. . . . What a handsome couple! . . . Look, Elly, as they're walking together: what a handsome couple! I declare I'm jealous of him. I should like to be as tall as that, with such a pair of shoulders and such a figure."

"But aren't you content that I like you as you are?"

"Yes, I'm quite content. I'm more than content, Elly. . . . I believe that I have come to my divine moment, my moment of happiness. . . ."

"It will be more than a moment."

"Are you certain of it?"

"Yes, I feel it within me . . . just as Ottilie felt it within her. And you?"

He looked at her gravely and did not tell her that she was much younger than Ottilie, too young to know so much. And he merely answered:

"I too believe that I know for certain. But we must not force the future. . . . Oh, what a wonderful evening! Look at those mountains beginning to turn violet. . . . The fairy-picture is changing every moment. The sea is rocking the wind in her lap and the phoenix is dying away in ashes. Let's stay here, let's stay and look. There are the first stars. It's as though the sea were becoming very calm and the wind sleeping peacefully on her blue breast. You can just feel its breath still, but it's asleep. . . . This is the land of life and love. We are too early for the season; but what do we care for smart people? . . . This is gorgeous, Elly, this wealth of life, of love, of living colour, fading away so purple in the darkness of the night. The cool breath of that mighty wind, which is now asleep: how very different from the howling wind of our north, which whistles so dismally! This mad merry wind here, now sleeping, like a giant, in the blue lap of that giantess, the sea! That's freedom, life, love and glory and pomp and gaiety. Oh, I'm not running down my country; but I do feel once more, after all these

months, that I can breathe freely and that there's a glow in life . . . and youth, youth, youth! It makes you feel drunk at first, but I'm already getting used to the intoxication. . . ."

They remained on the balcony. When the wind woke in the lap of the sea and got up again, with an unexpected leap of its giant gaiety, blowing the first stars clear of the last purple clouds with a single sweep, they went inside, with their arms around each other's waist.

Over the joyously-quivering sea the fierce mistral came rushing.

CHAPTER XVI

THE garden was reached from the flat by a little terrace and two or three steps.

"You are too early to see it in its winter glory," said Ottilie. "You're much too early. Nature here sleeps all through the summer under the scorching sun."

"That's one long, long love-sleep," said Lot, with his arm in his sister's.

"Yes, one long love-sleep," Ottilie echoed. "At the beginning of the autumn, the heavy rains come. They may overcome us yet, suddenly. When they are past, then nature buds for the winter. That is so exquisite here. When, everywhere up in the north, there's not a leaf or flower to be seen, the ground here is dug up, grass is sown and the mimosa blossoms and the carnations and you get your violets. You're too early, but you can see one phase of the change. Look at my last summer roses, blooming in such mad, jolly disorder. And the heliotrope, delicious, eh? Yes, this one is still glorious. Look at my pears: did you ever see such big ones? How many are there? Three, four, five . . . six. We'll pluck them; they're quite ripe: if they fall to the ground, the ants eat them

in a moment. . . . Aldo! Aldo! Come here for a second. . . . Pluck a few pears, will you? I can't reach them, no more can Lot . . . Elly, have you seen my grapes? Just look at my trellis-work of vines? It might be a pergola, mightn't it? And they're those raspberry-grapes, you know; you must taste them. Try this bunch: they're delicious. . . . We'll eat the pears presently, at lunch. They're like sweet, aromatic snow. . . . Here are figs for you: this is an old tree, but it still stands as a symbol of fruitfulness. Pick them for yourself, take as many as you like. . . . Here are my peaches. . . . How hot the sun is still! And everything's steaming: I love all that natural perfume. Those grapes sometimes drive me mad. . . ."

She thrust a white arm out of the sleeve of her white gown among the hazy-blue bunches and picked and picked, more and more. It was a feast of gluttony, an orgy of grapes. Aldo picked the finest for Elly. Well past forty, in the tranquil calmness of his graceful strength he was plainly a man of warm passion, a southern man of passion, a tranquil, smiling and yet passionate nature. As he drew himself up lissomely, in his loose-fitting grey-flannel suit, and stretched his hands towards the highest bunches, the harmonious lines of his statuesquely handsome figure appeared sinewy and supple; and there was this contradiction in him, that he suggested a piece of classic sculpture in the cos-

tume of to-day. The smiling serenity of his regular, large-boned face also reminded Lot of busts which he had seen in Italy: the *Hermes* of the Vatican—no, Aldo was not so intelligent as that—the *Antinous* of the Capitol, but a manlier brother; the *Wrestlers* of the Braccio Nuovo, only not so young and more powerfully built. . . . Aldo's smile answered to Ottilie's smile and contained the tranquillity of a secure happiness, of an intense moment of perfect human bliss. That moment was there, even if it were passing. That secure happiness was as the pressed bunch of grapes. . . .

Lot felt that he was living his own ecstatic moment, felt that he was happy in Elly, but yet he experienced a certain jealousy because of the physical happiness in that very good-looking couple: there was something so primitive in it, something almost classical in this southern autumnal nature, among this superabundance of bursting fruits; and he knew for certain that he would never approach such happiness, physically, because he felt the north in his soul, however eagerly his soul might try to escape that north; because he felt the dread of the years that were to come; because his love for Elly was so very much one of sympathy and temperament; because his nature was lacking in vigorous sensuality. And it made him feel the want of something; and because of that want he was jealous, with all the jealousy which he had inherited from his mother. . . . They too, Aldo and Ottilie,

felt no morbid melancholy, no sickly dread; and yet their happiness, however superabundant, had the sere tint of autumn, like all the nature around them. The glowing-copper leaves of the plane-trees blew suddenly over the vine-trellis, scattered by the rough, brusque hands of the gaily-gathering wind. A shudder passed through the disordered rose-bushes; a heavy-ripe pear fell to the ground. It was autumn; and neither Aldo nor Ottilie was young, really young. And yet they had found this; and who could tell what they had found before, each on a different path! Oh, that untrammelled happiness, that moment! . . . Oh, how Lot felt his jealousy! . . . Oh, how he longed to be like Aldo, so tall, so vigorous, handsome as a classical statue, so natural, a classical soul! . . . To feel his blood rush madly through his veins! . . . Oh, that north, which froze something inside him; that powerlessness to seize the moment with a virile hand; and the dread, the dread of what was to come: that horror of old age, while after all he was still young! . . . He now looked at his wife; and suddenly his soul became quite peaceful. He loved her. Silent inward melancholy, dread: those were his portion; they couldn't be helped; they must be accepted with resignation. The headiness of rapture could overwhelm him for a moment: it was not the true sphere of his happiness. It would intoxicate him: his blood was not rich enough for it. He loved, in so far as he was able; he was

happy, in so far as he could be. It was that, after all: he had found what he wanted, he wished to be grateful. A tenderness for Elly flowed through him so intensely: he felt that his soul was the sister-soul to hers. Superabundance was not for him; and the pressure of the things that passed had always weighed upon him and always hindered him from flinging his two arms riotously round life. . . .

He threw away the stalk of his bunch of grapes and followed Aldo, who was calling to him, indoors. The Italian took his arm with a movement of sympathy:

"Ottilie's going to sing," he said. "Your wife has asked her to."

His French had the sensual softness of his too southern accent.

Ottilie was already singing, to her own accompaniment, in the drawing-room. Her rich voice, schooled to the spaciousness of large halls, swelled to a pure stream of sound, made the air quiver even in the garden with notes heavy with happiness. It was an Italian song, by a composer whom Lot did not know; and it provided an illusion as though Ottilie were improvising the song at the moment. There was a single phrase, which opened softly, rippled with laughter and melted away swooning, like a nymph in a faun's arms.

"Another time, perhaps I'll sing you something serious," said Ottilie. "This is only a single cry: a cry of life, nothing more. . . ."

They sat down to lunch. The sun, which had scorched them, the wind, which had covered them with rough kisses, had given them an appetite; and the saffron *bouillabaisse* stimulated their palates lustily. On the side-board the fruit lay heaped in large, plain baskets and represented autumn's lavish abundance indoors as well.

"Lot," said Elly, suddenly, "I don't know what it is, but I suddenly feel the south."

"We poor northerners!" said Lot. "Ottilie and Aldo: *they* feel the south."

"But so do I!" said Elly.

"Nice is a novitiate for you, Elly, before you get to Italy!" said Ottilie. "Do you actually feel the south here? In the air?"

"Yes, in the air . . . and in myself, in *myself*. . . ."

"Well, we have tropical blood in us," said Ottilie. "Why shouldn't we feel the south at once? Aldo could never feel the north: he went to Stockholm with me when I was singing there."

"Didn't you feel the north, in the air?" asked Lot.

"*Sicuro!*" said Aldo. "I found it cold and bleak, but then it was winter. I felt no more in it than that. You northerners feel things more sensitively. We feel perhaps . . . more brutally and fully. We have redder blood. You have the gift of feeling *nuances*. We haven't. When I feel, I feel entirely. When Ottilie feels a thing now,

she also feels it like that. But she was not always so."

"Aldo is making a southerner of me!" said Ottilie. "He is wiping out all my *nuances!*"

Outside, the mistral rose and raged in a whirl of glowing-copper plane-leaves.

"That's autumn," said Ottilie.

"Turning into winter," said Lot.

"But winter here is life again, renewed. Life is renewed daily. Every day that comes is new life."

"So no dying, but everlasting resurrection?" asked Lot, with a smile.

"No dying, everlasting resurrection!"

Her voice rang out defiantly. Oh, to embrace the moment . . . with virile strength! It was not for him, thought Lot. But what there was was tender happiness. If only it remained so! If only he were not left behind, lonely, alone and old, now that he had known tender happiness! . . . He looked at his wife. The topaz-coloured wine sent a sparkle to her eyes and a flush over her usual pallor; she was joking with Aldo and Ottilie, was gayer than Lot had ever seen her; she became almost pretty and began boldly to talk Italian to Aldo, spinning out whole sentences which he corrected with his quiet laugh.

"Who knows," thought Lot, "what she may yet feel? She is twenty-three. She is very fond of me; and, before she came to love me, she had known

sorrow, because of another love. Who can tell what the years may bring? Oh, but this is a divine moment, these days are perhaps forming the most heavenly moment of my life! Let me never forget them. . . . I am happy, so far as I can be happy. And Elly must be feeling happy too. . . . She is breathing again. . . . It is as though an oppression had gone over her and as though she were breathing again. She lived too long with the old man. The past is an oppression in his house. It is an oppression at Grandmamma's. It is an oppression even with us, at home, because of Mamma . . . Life does not renew itself there. It dies away, it passes; and the melancholy of it depresses even us, the young people. . . . Oh, Elly will not be really happy until she is in Italy! . . . This is only an intoxication, delicious, but too full and brutal for our senses; and there . . . there, when we are working together, we shall find glad happiness: I know it! Glad happiness in a country not so sensual as Nice, but more intelligent and dusted exquisitely with the bloom of the dead past. . . . Yes, we shall be in harmony there and happy and we shall work together. . . ."

Aldo was opening the champagne; and Lot whispered:

"Elly!"

"What?"

"You felt the south just now?"

"Yes . . . oh, Lot, beyond a doubt!"

"Well, I . . . *I* feel happiness!"

She squeezed his hand; a smile played around her lips. She also would never forget this moment of her life, whatever else those future years might bring: with her northern soul of sadness, she felt the south and her happiness . . . and what passed they did not see. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THERE was a cold wind, with whirling snowflakes, and Aunt Stefanie de Laders had not at first intended to go out: she had a cough and lately had not been feeling at all the thing; she feared that this winter would be her last. Not everybody lived to be so old as Mamma or Mr. Takma; and she, after all, was seventy-seven: wasn't that a fine age? But she did not want to die yet, for she had always been very much afraid of death, always carried a horrid vision of Hell before her eyes: you could never know what awaited you, however good and religious you might have been, serving God properly. Now she, thank God, had nothing to reproach herself with! Her life had gone on calmly, day after day, without a husband, or children, or mundane ties, but also without any great sorrow. Twice she had suffered the loss of a tom-cat to which she was attached; and she thought it very sad when the birds in the cages grew old and lost their feathers and sometimes gripped on to their perches with their long claws, for years together, until one fine morning she found their little bodies stiff. She thought it sad that the family had no religion—the De Laders had

always had religion—and she felt very sad when Thérèse, in Paris, became a Catholic, for after all papistry was idolatry, that she knew for certain; and she also knew for certain that Calvin had had the root of the matter in him. She had always been able to save money and did not quite know how to dispose of it: she had executed a number of different wills, making bequests and then rescinding them; she would leave a good deal to charitable institutions. Her health for very long had been exceedingly good. Short, sprightly and withered, she had been very active, had for years run along the streets like a lapwing. Her witch-face became brown and tanned and wrinkled, small and wizened; and her little figure, with the shrunk breasts, bore no resemblance whatever to the even yet majestic old age of old, old Mamma. The barren field of her life, without emotion, love or passion, had grown drier and drier around her carping egoism, without arousing in her a sense of either melancholy or loss. On the contrary, she had felt glad that she was able to fear God, that she had had time to make her own soul and that she had not heard the sins of the body speak aloud, in between the murmured reading of her pious books and the shrill twittering of her birds. Lucky that she had never been hysterical, like those Dercksze, she thought contentedly, preferring with a certain filial reverence to put down that hysteria rather to the Dercksze' account than to that of her old mother, though nevertheless she

shook her head over Mamma for thinking so little, at her age, of Heaven and Hell and for continuing to see old Takma, doubtless in memory of former sinfulness. Anton was a dirty old blackguard and, old as he was, had narrowly escaped most unpleasant consequences, a month ago, for allowing himself to take liberties with his laundress' little girl; and Aunt, who saw a great deal of Ina, knew that it was owing to D'Herbourg's influence and intervention—he being the only one of the family who had any connections—that the business had no ill results, that it was more or less hushed up. But Aunt Stefanie thought it so sinful and hysterical of Anton, looked upon Anton as so irretrievably sold to Satan that she would have preferred to have nothing more to do with him . . . if it were not that he had some money and that she feared lest he should leave the money to sinful things and people . . . whereas Ina could do with it so well. And she now, in spite of the weather, thought of sending for a cab and going out: then she could first pick up Anton, as arranged, and take him with her to the Van Welys, Lily and Frits, to see their godchildren, Stefje and Antoinetje. There were two babies now; and she and Anton had a godchild apiece. A tenderness flowed through her selfish old-maid's heart at the thought of those children, who belonged to her just a little—for she tyrannized over Anton's godchild too—and in whom, she reflected contentedly, she had not the least sinful share. For she

considered the things of the flesh more or less sinful, even when hallowed by matrimony.

The cab came; and Aunt Stefanie, in a very old fur cloak, hoisted herself in, sprightlily, climbed up the step and felt anything but well. Was it coming at last? Was she about to fall ill and die? Oh, if she could only be sure of going to Heaven! So long as she was not sure of it, she would rather go on living, rather grow as old as Mother and Takma, rather live to be a hundred. The cab was now pulling up in front of the ground-floor rooms in which Anton lived; and she thought, should she wait till he came out or should she get out herself for a minute? She resolved upon the latter course and, when the door was opened by the landlady, she clambered down the step of the cab again, refusing the driver's assistance, and, with a few snowflakes on her old-lady's cape and old fur cloak, went in to her brother, who was sitting beside a closed stove, with his book and his pipe. A thick haze of smoke filled the room, drifting heavily with slow, horizontal cloud-lines.

"Well, Anton, you're expecting me, aren't you? It wouldn't be the thing if you weren't!" said Aunt Stefanie, in a tone of reproach.

Trippingly and imperiously, she went up to him. Her voice sounded shrill and her little witch-face shook and shivered out of the worn fur collar of her cloak, because she felt cold.

"Yes, all right," said Anton Dercksz, but with-

out getting up. "You'll sit down first, won't you, Stefanie?"

"But the cab's waiting, Anton; it means throwing money away for nothing!"

"Well, that won't ruin you. Is it really necessary that we should go and look at those brats?"

"You must see your godchild, surely. That's only proper. And then we're going on, with Ina and Lily, to Daan and Floor, at their hotel."

"Yes, I know, they arrived yesterday. . . . Look here, Stefanie, I can't understand why you don't leave me here in peace. You always want to boss people. I'm comfortable here, reading. . . ."

The warmth of the stove gave old Stefanie de Laders a blissful feeling; she held her numbed feet —Anton possessed no foot-stove—voluptuously to the glow; but the smoke of the pipe made her cough.

"Yes, yes, you're just sitting reading; I read too, but I read better books than you. . . . Let me see what you're reading, Anton. What is it? Latin?"

"Yes, it's Latin."

"I never knew that you read Latin."

"You don't know everything about me yet."

"No, thank God!" cried Stefanie, indignantly. "And what is that Latin book?" she asked, curiously and inquisitorially.

"It's sinful," said Anton, teasingly.

"I thought as much. What's it called?"

"It's Suetonius: *The Lives of the Caesars.*"

"So you're absorbed in the lives of those brutes, who tortured the early Christians!"

He grinned, with a broad grin. He sat there, big and heavy; and the folds and dewlaps of his full, yellow-red cheeks thrilled with pleasure at her outburst; the ends of his grey-yellow moustache stood straight up with merriment; and his eyes with their yellow irises gazed pensively at his sister, who had never been of the flesh. What hadn't she missed, thought Anton, in scoffing contempt, as he sat bending forwards. His coarse-fisted hands lay like clods on his thick knees; and the tops of his Wellington boots showed round under the trouser-legs. His waistcoat was undone; so were the two top buttons of his trousers; and Stefanie could just see his braces.

"You know more about history than I thought," he grinned.

She thought him repulsive and looked nervously round the room, which contained a number of open book-cases, with the curtains drawn back:

"Have you read all those books?" she asked.

"And read them over again. I do nothing else."

Stefanie de Laders was coughing more and more. Her feet were warm by this time. She was proof against much, but she felt as if she would faint with the smoke.

"Sha'n't we go now, Anton?"

He was not in the least inclined to go. He was

greatly interested in Suetonius at the moment; and she had disturbed him in his fantasy, which was intense in him. But she had such a way of nagging insistency; and he was really a weak man.

"I must just wash my hands."

"Yes, do, for you reek of that pipe of yours."

He grinned, got up and, without hurrying himself, went to his bedroom. Nobody knew of his solitary fantasies, which became more intense as he grew older and more impotent in his sensuality; nobody knew of the lust of his imagination nor how, as he read Suetonius, he pictured how he had once, in a century long past, been Tiberius, how he had held the most furious orgies in gloomy solitude at Capri and committed murder in voluptuousness and sent the victims of his passions dashing into the sea from the rocks and surrounded himself with a bevy of children beautiful as Cupids. The hidden forces of his intellect and imagination, which he had always enjoyed secretly, with a certain shyness towards the outside world, had caused him to read and study deeply in his younger years; and he knew more than any one talking to him would ever have suspected. On his shelves, behind novels and statute-books, he concealed works on the Kabbala and Satanism, being especially attracted in his morbid fancies by the strange mysteries of antiquity and the middle ages and endowed with a powerful gift of thinking himself back into former times, into a former life, into historic souls to which he felt

himself related, in which he incarnated himself. No one suspected it: people merely knew that he had been a mediocre official, that he read, that he smoked and that he had occasionally done shameful things. For the rest, his secret was his own; and that he often guessed at another's secret was a thing which not his mother nor Takma nor anybody would ever have suspected. . . .

The moment he had gone to his bedroom, Aunt Stefanie rose, tripped to the bookshelves and let her eyes move swiftly along the titles. What a lot of books Anton had! Look at that whole shelf of Latin books: was Anton as learned as that? And behind them: what did he keep behind those Latin books? Great albums and portfolios: what was in them? Would she have time to look? She drew one from behind the Latin books and, with quick, bird-like glances at the bedroom, opened the album, which had *Pompeii* on it. . . . What were those strange prints and photographs? Taken from statues, quite naked, from mural and ceiling frescoes; and such queer subjects, thought Aunt Stefanie. What was it all, what were those things and people and bodies and attitudes? Were they merely jokes which she did not understand? . . . Nevertheless they were enough to make her turn pale; and her wrinkled little witch-face grew longer and longer in dismay, while her mouth opened wide. She turned the pages of the album more and more swiftly, so as to be sure and miss nothing, and then

went back to certain plates which struck her particularly. The world, so new to her, of classical perversion sped past her awe-struck eyes in undivined sinfulness, represented by man and beast and man-beast in contortions which her imagination, untutored in sensuality, could never have suspected. A devil's sabbath hypnotized her from out of those pages; and the book, weighing so heavy in her trembling old fingers, burnt her; but she simply could not slip it back into its hidden nook . . . just because she had never known . . . and because she was very inquisitive . . . and because she had never suspected superlative sin. . . . Those were the portals of Hell; the people who had acted so and thought so would burn in Hell-fire for ever: she not, fortunately!

"What are you doing?"

Anton's voice startled her; she gave a little scream; the book slipped from her hands.

"*Must* you go prying about?" asked Anton, roughly.

"Well, can't I look at a book?" stammered Aunt Stefanie. "I wasn't doing anything improper!" she said, defending herself.

He picked up the album and shoved it back violently behind the Latin volumes. Then, becoming indifferent, he grinned, with eyes like slits:

"And what have you seen?"

"Nothing, nothing," stammered Stefanie. "You just came in . . . and startled me so. I saw

nothing, nothing. . . . Are you ready? Shall we go?"

Buttoned up in his great-coat, he followed her tripping little steps; he grinned at her scornfully: how much she had missed! And, if she *had* seen anything, how she must have been shocked!

"He is the devil!" she thought, in her fright. "He is the devil! If it wasn't for that sinful money, which it would be such a pity for him not to leave to Ina, I should drop him altogether, I should never wish to see him again. For he is not all the thing. . . ."

CHAPTER XVIII

INA D'HERBOURG was waiting for them in the little house of her son-in-law and daughter, Frits and Lily van Wely: Frits, a callow little officer; Lily, a laughing, fair-haired little mother, up again pluckily after her confinement. There were the two children, Stefanus a year and Antoinetje a fortnight old; the monthly nurse, fat and pompous; the maid-of-all-work busy with the little boy; the twelve-o'clock lunch not cleaned away yet; a bustle of youth and young life: one child crowing, the other screaming, the nurse hushing it and filling the whole house with her swelling figure. The maid let the milk catch, opened a window; there was a draught; and Ina cried:

"Jansje, what a draught you're making! Shut the window, shut the window, here are Uncle and Aunt! . . ."

And Jansje, who knew that Uncle Anton and Aunt Stefanie were godfather and godmother, flew to the door, leaving the milk to boil over, forgetting to close the window, with the result that the old people were received amidst a cold hurricane which made Aunt Stefanie, whose throat was already irritated by Anton's smoke, cough still more and mumble:

"It's not the thing, a draught like this; *such* a draught!"

The fire which Jansje had lighted in the little drawing-room had gone out again; and Lily and Frits, wishing above all to make things pleasant for the old people, now brought them back again to the dining-room, where Jansje, in her eagerness to clear the table, dropped and broke a plate, whereupon exclamations from Jansje and reproaches from Lily and despairing glances of Ina at her son-in-law Frits. No, Lily did not get that slovenliness from her, for *she* took after the IJsselmondes and they were correct; Lily got it from the Derckszes. But Frits now understood that he must be very civil to Uncle Anton, whom he detested, while Lily, whom Uncle Anton always kissed at very great length, loathed him, felt sick at the sight of him, for Lily also had to make up to Uncle Anton, that being Mamma's orders. She had married Frits without any money; but the young couple had very soon perceived that money was not to be despised; and the only two from whom there was a trifle to be expected were Aunt Stefanie and Uncle Anton.

The old man, after being dragged there by his sister against his will, had recovered his good temper thanks to the lingering kiss which he had given Lily and, with his fists like clods upon his knees, sat chuckling and nodding in admiration when Nurse held up the yelling brat to him. And, though he was jealous of young, vigorous people, he found an

emotion in his jealousy, found young, vigorous people pleasant to look at and considered that that virile little Frits, that callow, stiff little officer, might well make a good husband to his wife. He nodded at Lily and then at Frits, to convey that he understood them, and Lily and Frits smiled back vacuously. They did not understand him, but that didn't matter: he guessed that they were still very much in love, even though they had two brats; and he also guessed that they were keen on his bit of money. Well, they were quite right from their point of view; only he couldn't stand Ina, because, ever since D'Herbourg had helped him in his trouble with the little laundry-girl, she treated him with a kindly condescension, as the influential niece who had saved her imprudent uncle from that *soesah*.[1] He grinned, seeing through all that coaxing pretence and chuckling to himself that it was all wasted, because he had no intention of leaving them his bit of money. But he knew better than to let this out to Stefanie or any of them; on the contrary, amid all the pretty things that were said to him, he gloated over the gin-and-bitters which Frits so attentively set before him, after helping him off—he wasn't feeling cold now, was he?—with his great-coat. He thought the whole farce most diverting and laughed pleasantly and benevolently, with the air of a good, kind uncle who was so fond of the children, while he thought to himself:

[1] Malay: bother, scrape, fuss.

"They sha'n't get one cent!"

And he chuckled so deliciously at the thought that he was quite pleased to give the fat monthly nurse a couple of guilders. They were all taken in—Aunt Stefanie, Ina and the young couple—when they saw Uncle behaving so good-naturedly and so generously; they looked upon him as hooked; and he left them in the illusion, which he so cleverly saw through. What the devil, he thought, in a dull, gathering rage, did he care about those young people? Hadn't they enough with their youth and their two vigorous bodies, that they must go coveting his few thousand guilders? And what did he care about that brat which they had christened Antoinette after him? He had a horror of newborn children, though he had sometimes thought children very nice when they were just a few years older. Things misted before his eyes, but he mastered himself in his dull rage and in his slimy thoughts and behaved benevolently and genially as the well-off uncle and godfather who was going to leave all his money to the brat.

"And Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor arrived yesterday," said Ina d'Herbourg, with a suppressed sigh, for she looked upon the Indian relations as unpresentable. "We said we'd call on them together to-day, didn't we, Aunt Stefanie?"

"That'll save her a cab-fare," thought Anton Dercksz.

"Yes," said Lily, "we might as well be going on, don't you think so, Uncle?"

"Certainly, dear."

"Frits'll come on presently, won't you, after barracks? I'll just go and get on my things. I do think it so nice of you, Uncle Anton, to come and have a look at the baby. I had begun to despair of your ever coming, for you had promised me so long. . . ."

"You see Uncle always keeps his promises, dear. . . ."

He said it with the appearance of kindliness, put out his hand as she passed, drew her to him and, as though under the softening influence of the visit, gave her another long, lingering kiss. She shuddered and hurried away. In the passage she met her husband, buckling on his sword.

"Don't let that filthy old scoundrel kiss you like that!" hissed Frits, furiously.

"How can I help it? The brute makes me sick! . . ."

He went out, slamming the front-door, thinking that his young happiness was already being defiled because they were hard up and had to besmirch themselves in consequence. Ina, Uncle and Aunt waited in the dining-room until Lily was ready.

"Uncle Daan must be very comfortably off," said Ina, with glittering eyes. "Papa, who is bound to know, always refuses to talk about money and

wouldn't say how much he thought Uncle Daan had. . . ."

"And how much would you say it was?" asked Aunt Stefanie.

"Oh, Aunt," said Ina, with a well-bred glance of her weary eyes, "I *never* speak or think about money and I really don't know how rich Uncle Daan is . . . but still I believe he is worth seven hundred thousand guilders. What makes them come to Holland so suddenly, in the winter? Business, Papa said; and he ought to know. But, as you know, Papa never says much and never talks about business or money. But *I've* been wondering to myself, could Uncle Daan have lost all his money? And mark my words: if so, Papa will have him on his hands."

For Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor, who were unpresentably Indian, had children of their own; there were no expectations therefore from that quarter; and Ina hated them with a profound hatred and, jealous of their wealth, spoke as much ill of them as she dared.

"Should you say so?" asked Aunt Stefanie.

"They've always been in business together," said Ina, "so, *if* Uncle Daan has lost his money, Papa is sure to have him on his hands."

"But, if he's worth seven hundred thousand guilders?" asked Anton Dercksz.

"Yes, in that case," said Ina, covetously. "But perhaps he hasn't seven hundred thousand. I don't

know. I never talk about money; and what other people have is *le moindre de mes soucis.*"

Lily came down, looking the sweetest of little fair-haired women in her fur boa; and the four of them went to the cab, while Jansje created a fresh draught by opening the door too wide.

And Ina insisted that Uncle Anton should sit in the front seat, beside Aunt Stefanie, and she and Lily with their backs to the horse, while Uncle Anton, with pretended gallantry, tried to resign the place of honour to her, though he was glad that she did not accept it. All that family was only a tie, which bound you without doing you the least good. There was that old bird of a Stefanie, who had dragged him from his reading, his warm room, his pipe, his Suetonius and his pleasant reverie, first to look at a brat to whom he wasn't going to leave a cent and next to call at an hotel on a brother who chose to come from India to Holland in December. All such unnecessary things; and what thousands of them you did in your life! There were times when you simply couldn't be your own master. . . . He indemnified himself by pressing his knees against Lily's and feeling the warmth of her fresh young body. His eyes grew misty.

The cab stopped at the big *pension* where Uncle Daan was accustomed to stay when he came home from India. They were at once shown in to Aunt Floor, who had seen them through the window; a *baboe* was standing at the door of the room.

"Come inn! Come insside!" cried Aunt Floor, in a bass voice and accentuating her consonants. "How d'ye do, Stefanie? How d'ye do, Anton? And how d'ye do, Ina . . . and you, little Lily: *allah,*[1] two childr-r-ren alr-r-ready, that little thing!"

Aunt Floor had not got up to receive them; she was lying on a sofa and a second *baboe* was massaging her huge, fat legs. The girl's hands glided to and fro beneath her mistress' dressing-gown.

"Caughtt cold!" said Aunt Floor, angrily, as though the others could help it, after renewed words of welcome on their part and enquiries after the voyage. "Caughtt cold in the train from Paris. I assur-r-re you, I'm as stiff as a boar-r-rd. What came over Dhaan, to want to come to Gholland at thiss time of year, I cannott make out. . . ."

"Why didn't you stay behind in India, Aunt?" asked Ina, well-bred and weary-eyed.

"Not likely! I ssee myself letting Dhaan gho alone! No, dear, we're man and wife and where Uncle Dhaan ghoes *I* gho. Old people like us belong to one another. . . . Dhaan is with Gharold now, in the other room: your Papa arrived a moment agho, Ina. Those two are talking bissiness of course. I asked Dhaan, 'Dhaan, what on ear-r-rth do you want to gho to Gholland for?' 'Bissiness!' says Dhaan. Nothing but bissiness, bissiness. I don't understand it: you can always wr-r-rite about bissi-

[1] Lord!

ness. Year after year that confounded bissiness; and nothing ghoes r-r-right: we're as poor as r-r-rats. . . . There, Saripa, *soeda,*[1] that's enough: I'm as stiff as a boar-r-rd all the same."

The two *baboes* left the room; the anthracite-stove glowed like an oven, red behind its little mica doors. Aunt Floor had drawn herself up with a deep sigh and was now sitting: her fat, yellow face, with the Chinese slanting eyes, loomed like a full moon from out of the hair, still black, which went back, smooth and flat, to a large *kondé;*[2] and there was something of a mandarin about her as she sat, with her legs wide apart in the flannel dressing-gown and her fat, swollen little hands on her round knees, just as Anton Dercksz often used to sit. Her sunken breast hung like the bosom of a *tepèkong*[3] in two billows on her stomach's formidable curve; and those rounded lines gave her an idol-like dignity, as she now sat erect, with her stiff, angry mandarin-face. From the long lobes of her ears hung a pair of enormous brilliants, which gleamed round her with startling brightness and did not seem to belong to her attire—the loose flannel bag—so much as to her own being, like a jewel set in an idol. She was not more than sixty; she was the same age as Ottilie Steyn de Weert.

"And is old Mamma well? . . . It's nice of

[1] That will do.
[2] The chignon or knot of hair at the back of the head.
[3] A Javanese dancer or nautch-girl, often old and ugly.

you to have come," she said, remembering that she had not yet said anything amiable to her relations.

Her gelatinous mass now shook more genially on the sofa, while around her sat Stefanie, with her wrinkled witch-face; Anton, who recollected Floor forty years ago, when she was still a strapping young *nonna,* a *nonna* with Chinese blood in her veins, which gave her an exotic attraction for the men; Ina d'Herbourg, very Dutch and correct, blinking her eyes with a well-bred air; and the fair-haired little wife, Lily.

"Why dhoesn't Dhaan come?" exclaimed Aunt Floor. "Lily, gho and see what's become of your gr-r-randpapa and your uncle."

"I'll go, Aunt," said Ina d'Herbourg. "You stay here, dear. She mustn't walk about much yet, Aunt."

And Ina, who was curious to see the rooms which Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor occupied, rose and went through Aunt's bedroom, with a quick glance at the trunks. One of the *baboes* was busy hanging up dresses in a wardrobe.

"Where are the gentlemen, *baboe?*"

"In the study, *njonja.*"

The *baboe* pointed the way to Ina through the conservatory. Well, they were handsome and no doubt expensive rooms. Ina knew that the *pension* was not a cheap one; and Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor would hardly be poor as "r-r-rats." So Uncle

had his own bedroom and a study besides. Papa was with him now and they were doubtless talking business, for they were jointly interested in various undertakings. At home Papa never talked about business, vouchsafed no information, to Ina's great despair. . . . She heard their voices. And she was thinking of creeping up quietly through the conservatory—who knew but that she might overhear some detail which would tell her of the state of Uncle Daan's fortune?—from sheer innocent curiosity, when she suddenly stopped with a start. For she had heard Uncle Daan's voice, which had not changed during the five years since she had seen Uncle, exclaim:

"Harold, have you known it all this time?"

"Ssh!" she heard, in her father's voice.

And Uncle Daan repeated, in a whisper:

"Have you known it all this time?"

"Don't speak so loud," said Harold Dercksz, in a hushed tone. "I thought I heard somebody. . . ."

"No, it's the *baboe* clearing up . . . and she doesn't understand Dutch. . . ."

"Speak low for all that, Daan," said Harold Dercksz. "Yes, I've known it all this time!"

"All the time?"

"Yes, sixty years."

"I never . . . I never knew it."

"Speak low, speak low! And is *she* dead now?"

"Yes, she's dead."

"What did you say her name was?"

"Ma-Boeten."

"That's it: Ma-Boeten. I was a child of thirteen. She was Mamma's maid and used to look after me too."

"It was her children who began to molest me. She told her son about it: he is a *mantri*[1] in the rent-office."

"Yes."

"He's a damned villain. I gave him money."

"That was right. . . . But, you see, Daan, it's so long ago now."

"Yes, it's a very long time ago."

"Don't speak about it to Floor."

"No, never, never. That's why it's just as well she came with me. If she had stayed at Tegal, that damned villain might have . . . Yes, it's certainly a very long time ago."

"And it's passing. . . . It's passing. . . . A little longer and . . ."

"Yes, then it will all be past. . . . But to think that you, Harold, should have known it all this time!"

"Not so loud, not so loud! I hear something in the conservatory. . . ."

It was Ina's dress rustling. She had heard with a beating heart, tortured with curiosity. And she had not understood a word, but she remembered the name of the dead *baboe,* Ma-Boeten.

[1] Native clerk.

She now deliberately rustled the silk of her skirt, pretended to have just come through the conservatory, threw open the doors, stood on the threshold:

"Uncle Daan! Uncle Daan!"

She saw the two old men sitting, her father and his brother. They were seventy-three and seventy. They had not yet been able to recover their ordinary expression and relax the tense dismay of their old faces, which had gazed with blinded eyes into the distant past. Ina thought them both looking ghastly. What had they been talking about? *What* was it that they were hiding? *What* had Papa known for sixty years? *What* had Uncle Daan only known for such a short time? . . . And she felt a shiver going along her, as of something clammy that went trailing by.

"I've come to look for you, Uncle Daan!" she exclaimed, with an affectation of cordiality. "Welcome to Holland, Uncle, welcome! You're not lucky with the weather: it's bleak and cold. You must have been very cold in the train. Poor Aunt Floor is as stiff as a board. . . . Uncle Anton is there too and Aunt Stefanie; and my Lily came along with us. I'm not interrupting you . . . in your business?"

Uncle Daan kissed her, answered her in bluff, genial words. He was short, lean, bent, tanned, Indian in his clothes; a thin grey tuft of hair and the cut of his profile gave him a look of a parrot;

and, thanks to this bird-like aspect, he resembled his sister Stefanie. Like her, he had quick, beady eyes, which still trembled with consternation, because of what he had been discussing with his brother Harold. He clawed a few papers together, crammed them into a portfolio, to give the impression that he and Harold had been talking business, and said that they were coming. They went back with Ina to the sitting-room and greetings were exchanged between Uncle Daan and those who had come to welcome him.

"Aunt Floor knows nothing," thought Ina, remembering how Aunt had just spoken about her coming to Holland.

Why had they come? What was the matter? *What* was it that Papa had known for sixty years and Uncle Daan for only such a short time? Was *that* why he had come to Holland? Had it anything to do with money: a legacy to which they were entitled? . . . Yes, that was it, a legacy: perhaps they would still become very rich. Did Aunt Stefanie know about it? Uncle Anton? Aunt Ottilie? Grandmamma? Mr. Takma? . . . *What* was it? And, if it was a legacy, how much? . . . She was burning with curiosity, while she remained correct, even more correct than she was by nature, in contrast with the Indian unconstraint of Uncle Daan—in his slippers—and the Chinese *tepèkong* that was Aunt Floor, with her bosom billowing down upon her round stomach. She was burning with curiosity,

while her eyes glanced wearily, while she made well-bred efforts to conceal her eager longing to find out. And stories were told that did not interest her. Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor talked about their children: Marinus, who was manager of a big sugar-factory and lived near Tegal, with a large family of his own; Jeanne—"Shaan," as Aunt called her—the wife of the resident of Cheribon; Dolf unmarried, a magistrate. She, Ina d'Herbourg, did not care a jot about the cousins, male or female, would rather never see them: they were such an Indian crew; and she just made herself pleasant, condescendingly, but not too much so, pretending to be interested in the stories of Clara, Marinus' daughter, who was lately married, and Emile, "Shaan's" son, who was so troublesome.

"Yes," said Aunt Floor, "and here we are, in Gholland, in this r-r-rotten *pension* . . . for bissiness, nothing but bissiness . . . and yes, *kassian*,[1] we're still as poor as r-r-rats! What am I to do here for five months? I shall never stand it, if this weather keeps on. Luckily, I've got Tien Deysselman and Door Perelkamp"—these were two old Indian ladies—"and they'll soon look me up. They wr-r-rote to me to bring them some Chinese cards and I've brought twenty packs with me: that'll help me get through the five months. . . ."

And Aunt Floor glared out of her angry old mandarin-face at her husband, "Dhaan."

[1] Oh dear! Poor things!

No, thought Ina, Aunt Floor did not know about the legacy. Perhaps it wasn't a legacy. But then what was it? . . .

She and Lily went back in the cab that came for Harold; Stefanie drove Anton home in hers. Ina at once went in search of her husband: she must consult somebody and she knew of no one better. She found him in his office:

"Leopold, can I speak to you?" she asked.

"I have a consultation presently," he said, consequentially.

She knew that he was lying, that he had nothing to do. She sat down quietly, without removing her cloak or hat.

"Leopold . . ."

She frightened him.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"We *must* find out why Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor have come to Holland."

"Goodness gracious!" he exclaimed. "Papa's affairs haven't gone wrong, have they?"

"I don't know, I don't think so; but there's something that's brought Uncle Daan over."

"Something? What?"

"I don't know, but there's something: something that Papa has known for sixty years, ever since he was a child of thirteen. Uncle Daan has only known it a little while and apparently has come to Holland to consult Papa."

"How do you know?"

"I know: take it from me that I know. And I know more besides."

"What is that?"

"That Aunt Floor does *not* know and that Uncle Daan does not mean to tell her. That Grandmamma's old *baboe* was called Ma-Boeten and that she's dead. That her son is a *mantri* at Tegal and that Uncle Daan has given him money. That's all I know."

They looked at each other. Both of them were very pale.

"What an incoherent story!" said Leopold d'Herbourg, barrister and solicitor, with a consequential shrug of the shoulders.

Ina, well-bred as usual, cast up her eyes wearily:

"It's very important. I don't know what it is, but it's important and I want to know. Could it have to do with a legacy?"

"A legacy?" echoed D'Herbourg, failing to see.

"Something that's due to us? Could that *mantri* know things which, if Uncle Daan gave him money . . ."

"Perhaps," said D'Herbourg, "it has to do with money which Papa and Uncle Daan owe . . ."

This time, Ina turned very pale:

"No," she exclaimed, "that would be . . ."

"You can never tell. The best thing is not to talk about it. Besides, Papa won't let anything out, in any case."

But Ina's curiosity was too much for her. She

nodded her head in her well-bred way, under the white bird of paradise in her hat:

"I *must* know," she said.

"How will you find out?"

"You might speak to Papa, ask him what's depressing him. . . ."

"What's depressing him? But I've never known him to be anything but depressed, during all the twenty-three years that we've been married. Papa never talks to me; he even employs another solicitor for his business, as you know."

"Then *I* will ask Papa."

"That won't be any good."

"I *must* know," said Ina, rising. "I don't see a legacy in it, after what you've said. Oh dear, oh dear, who knows what it can be? Money perhaps which . . ."

"It's certainly money."

"Which Papa and Uncle Daan . . ."

"May have to repay, if . . ."

"Do you think so?"

"They do so much business in common. That leads to all sorts of complications. And it won't be the first time that men who do a great deal of business . . ."

"Yes, I understand."

"Perhaps it's better not to mix yourself up in it at all. You would do wiser to be careful. You never know what hornets' nest you're bringing about your ears."

"It happened sixty years ago. It dates sixty years back. What an immense time!" said Ina, hypnotized by the thought.

"That's certainly very long ago. The whole thing is out of date!" said D'Herbourg, pretending to be indifferent, though inwardly alarmed.

"No," said Ina, shaking the white bird of paradise, "it's something that is not yet past. It *can't* be. But Papa hoped that, before very long . . . ."

"What?"

"It *would* be past."

They both looked very pale:

"Ina, Ina, do be careful!" said D'Herbourg. "You don't know what you're meddling with!"

"No!" she said, like a woman in a trance.

She must know, she was determined to know. She resolved to speak to her father that evening.

CHAPTER XIX

SHE wandered round the house, greatly agitated and uncertain what to do. She heard her son Pol, the undergraduate, in his room downstairs, next to the front-door. He was sitting there smoking with some friends; and as she passed she listened to the lads' noisy voices. There was a ring at the door: it was her younger boy, Gus, her favourite; and, glad to hear his merry and youthful chatter, she forgot for a moment the feverish curiosity that consumed her so fiercely.

She now thought of going to her father in his study, but it was too near dinner-time, she feared, and Papa did not like being disturbed at this hour. She was restless, could not sit down, kept wandering about. Just imagine, if Papa was ruined, what should they do? Aunt Stefanie would perhaps leave something to Gus, she was fonder of him than of the others; but there were so many nephews and nieces. If only Aunt didn't fritter her little fortune away in legacies! . . . Her maternal feelings, always centring on the question of money, made her think of the future of her three children. Well, for Lily she was doing everything in her power, working on the feelings of both Aunt Stefanie and Uncle Anton. As for Pol, he must manage as best he

could: if he had a million, he would still be hard up.

The dinner-hour approached; and she waited, with D'Herbourg and the two boys, in the dining-room, for Papa to come down. When Harold Dercksz entered, it seemed to her that Father's long, lean figure, which was always bent, was now more bent than ever; a bilious yellow gave his hollow cheeks a deep metallic colour. Ina loved a formal but cheerful table; the simple meal was tastefully served; she kept up a certain style in her home, was a very *grande dame* of a housekeeper. She had brought up her children with the utmost correctness and could not understand that Lily had so soon kicked over the traces, immediately after her marriage: what a scene of slovenliness you always found at Frits and Lily's! She was pleased with her boys as she thought of it, pleased with their manners at table: Pol talked gaily and pleasantly, though not too noisily, because of Grandpapa; Gus made a little joke from time to time; then Ina would laugh and stroke his head. Harold Dercksz hardly spoke at all, listened to the boys with a smile of pain on his lips. D'Herbourg carved. There was usually a separate dish for Grandpapa: he had to be very careful because of his digestion and his liver. As a matter of fact, he was always in pain. Sometimes his forehead puckered with physical agony. He never spoke of what he suffered, did what the doctor told him, was always taciturn and gentle, quietly dignified, broken in body

through illness, broken in soul through the melancholy that shone in the gentle glance of his old eyes with their discoloured irises. Ina looked after her father, began by seeing to his special dish; she was attentive and liked to have everything quite right in her house and at her table.

At dessert, however, her uncontrollable curiosity arose in her once more. Questions burnt upon her lips, but of course she would ask nothing during dinner . . . and she again laughed at something that Gus said, stroked his curly head. She looked more motherly in her indoor dress; when she was with Gus, her weary eyes had not the same ultra-well-bred glance as under the waving white bird of paradise, when she sat cheek by jowl with fat Aunt Floor, who was so Indian. Papa got up at dessert and said, courteously:

"Do you mind, Ina? My pain's rather bad this evening. . . ."

"Poor Father!" she said, kindly.

The old man left the room: Pol had jumped up at once to open the door for him. The parents and the two boys sat on a little longer. Ina told the others about Uncle Daan and Aunt Floor; they were amused at the twenty packs of Chinese playing-cards. Gus, who was a good mimic, imitated the Indian accent of Aunt Floor, whom he remembered from her last visit, a couple of years ago; and Ina laughed merrily at her boy's wit. Thus encouraged, Gus mimicked Aunt Stefanie, made his face look

like an elderly bird's, with a quivering, flexible neck, and D'Herbourg roared with delight; but Pol, the undergraduate, cried:

"Don't forget, Gus, that you've got expectations from Aunt. You must never let her know you mimic her!"

"It's not nice of you to say that," said Ina, in a mildly reproachful tone. "No, Pol, it's not nice of you. You know Mamma doesn't like allusions to expectations and so forth. No, Pol, it's not very good taste. . . . I can't understand how Papa can laugh at it."

But the merriment continued because of Gus; and, when he imitated Uncle Anton, with his fists clenched on his knees, Ina allowed herself to be led on and they all three laughed, leagued against the Derckszes as in a family alliance of aristocratic Jonkheer d'Herbourgs against Indian uncles, aunts, grand-uncles and grandaunts.

"Yes, Grandpapa is certainly the best of them," said Pol. "Grandpapa is always distinguished."

"Well, Greatgranny"—as the children called the old lady—"Greatgranny, old as she is, is a very distinguished woman!" said Ina.

"What tons of old people we have in the family!" said Gus, irreverently.

Ina repressed him: no jokes about the old lady; for that matter, they all of them stood in awe of her, because she was so very old and remained so majestic.

"Aunt Ottilie has turned sixty, hasn't she?" Ina asked, suddenly, hypnotized by the number sixty, which loomed fatefully large before her eyes.

And the D'Herbourgs now ceased talking of money, but discussed the family instead. With the exception of Grandmamma and Papa—Greatgranny and Grandpapa to the boys—they pulled all the others to pieces and Gus mimicked them all: in addition to Uncle Anton, Aunt Stefanie and Aunt Floor, he mimicked Uncle Daan, mimicked the son who held a legal office out there, mimicked "Shaan," the resident's wife at Cheribon. He had seen them all in Holland, when they came home for anything from two to twelve months on leave; and they always provided food for discussion and jest in the D'Herbourg mansion. But Ina did not laugh any more and stood up, while her curiosity burnt her to the point of causing her physical pain.

Harold Dercksz was sitting upstairs at his big writing-table. A lamp with a green shade made him appear still yellower; and the wrinkles were sharply furrowed in the old man's worn face. He sat huddled in his chair, screening his eyes with his hand. In front of him lay great sheets of figures, which he had to examine, as Daan had asked him to. He stared before him. Sixty years ago he had seen the Thing. It was slowly passing, but in passing it came back again to him so closely, so very closely. The sight of it had given his child-brain and child-nerves a shock for all his life; and that he had grown old

quietly, very old, older than he need have, was due to his self-restraint. . . . The thing of the past, the terrible Thing, was a ghost and looked at him with eyes while it came nearer, dragging its veil of mist over rustling leaves, over a path lined with sombre trees from which the leaves fell everlastingly. . . . The Thing was a ghost and came nearer and nearer in passing, before it would vanish entirely in the past; but never had a single creature appeared from behind the trees to stretch out a forbidding hand and hold back the ghastly Thing that went trailing by. . . . Was a shadow loitering behind the trees, was some one really appearing, did he really see a hand motioning the thing, the ghastly Thing, to stop in its passage through the rustling leaves? . . . Oh, if it would only pass! . . . How slowly, how slowly it passed! . . . For sixty long years it had been passing, passing. . . . And the old man and the old woman, both in their respective houses or sitting together at the windows, were waiting until it should have passed. . . . But it would not pass, so long as they were still alive. . . . Harold Dercksz felt pity for the old man, for the old woman. . . . Oh, if it would but pass! . . . How long the years lasted! . . . How old *they* had grown! . . . Why must they grow so old? . . . Was that their punishment, *their* punishment, the punishment of both of them? For he now knew what part his mother had played in the crime, the terrible crime. Daan had told

him; Ma-Boeten had told her son; the *mantri* had told Daan. There were so many who knew it! And the old people believed that nobody . . . that nobody knew it except . . . except old Dr. Roelofsz! . . . Oh, so many knew it, knew the Thing that was buried and kept on raising its spectral form, the secret that was always rising up again in its clammy mist. . . . Oh, that he must needs grow so old, *so* old that Daan now knew it too! If only Daan held his tongue and did not tell Floor! Would he hold his tongue? Would the *mantri* go on holding his tongue? Money must be paid, at least until the old, the poor old people were dead . . . and until the Thing was past for them and with them. . . .

A gentle tap; and the door opened: he saw his daughter on the threshold.

"Father dearest," she said, winningly.

"What is it, dear?"

Ina came nearer.

"I'm not disturbing you, I hope? I came to see how you were. I thought you looked so bad at dinner. . . ."

She tended him, like a good daughter; and he appreciated it. His heart was sensitive and soft and he appreciated the companionship of the home: Ina's care, the boys' youth imparted a genial warmth to his poor chilled heart; and he put out his hand to her. She sat down beside his chair, giving a quick glance at the papers before him, interested in the

sight of all those figures, which no doubt represented the state of Papa's fortune and Uncle Daan's. Then she asked:

"Are you ill, Father dear?"

"Yes," he said, moaning, "I'm in pain." And, moved by her affection, he added, "Better if it were over with me soon."

"Don't say that: we could never do without you."

He smiled, with a gesture of denial:

"You would have a trouble the less."

"Why, you know you're no trouble to me."

It was true and she said it sincerely; the note of sincerity rang true in his child's motherly voice.

"But you oughtn't to be always working like this," she went on.

"I don't do much work."

"What are all those figures?"

She smiled invitingly. He knew her curiosity, had known it ever since her childhood, when he had caught her ferreting in his writing-desk. Since that time, he had locked everything up.

"Business," he replied, "Indian business. I have to look into these figures for Uncle Daan, but it doesn't mean much work."

"Is Uncle Daan satisfied with the business?"

"Yes, he is. We shall be rich yet, dear."

"Do you think so?"

Her voice sounded greedy.

"Yes. Have no fear. I'll leave you something yet."

His voice sounded bitter.

"Oh, Father, I really wasn't thinking of that. I do worry about money sometimes, because of Lily, who married on nothing: what have Frits and Lily to live on? And because of my boys. I don't care about money myself."

It was almost true; it had become true as the years went on. Since she had grown older, she thought of money more for her children's sake; motherliness had developed in her soul, even though that soul remained material and small.

"Yes," said Harold Dercksz, "I know."

"You are so depressed, Father."

"I am just the same as usual."

"No, Uncle Daan has made you depressed. I can see it."

He was silent and on his guard.

"You never speak out, Father. Is there nothing I can do for you? What's depressing you?"

"Nothing, dear."

"Yes, there is; yes, there is. Tell me what's depressing you."

He shook his head.

"Won't you tell me?"

"There's nothing."

"Yes, there's something. Perhaps it's something terrible."

He looked her in the eyes.

"Father, is it a secret?"

"No, dear."

"Yes, it is; it's a secret. It's a secret, a secret that's depressing you . . . since I don't know how long."

He turned cold in his limbs and all his soul armed itself, as in a cuirass, and he remained like that, on his guard.

"Child, you're fancying things," he said.

"No, I'm not, but you won't speak. It hurts me to see you so sad."

"I am unwell."

"But you are depressed . . . by that terrible thing . . . that secret. . . ."

"There's nothing."

"No, there must be something. Is it about money?"

"No."

"Is it about money which Uncle Daan . . ." He looked at her.

"Ina," he said, "Uncle Daan sometimes has different ideas about absolute honesty in business . . . from those which I have. But he always ends by accepting my view. I am not depressed by any secret about money."

"About what then?"

"Nothing. There is no secret, dear. You're fancying things."

"No, I'm not. I . . . I . . ."

"You know?" he asked, loudly, with his eyes looking into hers.

She started.

"N-no," she stammered. "I . . . I don't know anything . . . but . . . I *feel* . . ."

"What?"

"That there's a secret that's depressing you."

"What about?"

"About . . . about something that's happened. . . ."

"You know," he said.

"No, I don't."

"Nothing has happened, Ina," he said, coldly. "I am an old, sick man. You tire me. Leave me in peace. Leave me in peace."

He rose from his chair, nervous, agitated. She drew up her weary eyes with her well-bred expression, with her mother's expression, the expression of the IJsselmondes, who were her source of pride.

"I will not tire you, Papa," she said—and her voice, sharp but tuned to the correct social enunciation, sounded affected—"I will not tire you. I will leave you in peace. I came to you, I wanted to speak to you . . . because I thought . . . that you had some worry . . . some sorrow. I wanted to share it. But I will not insist."

She went on, slowly, with the offended haughtiness of a *grande dame,* as Harold Dercksz remembered seeing his mother leave the room after a conversation. A reproachful tenderness welled up

in him; he had almost kept her back. But he restrained his emotion and let her go. She was a good daughter to him, but her soul, the soul of a small-minded woman, was all consumed with money needs, with foolish conceit about small, vain things —because her mother was a Freule IJsselmonde— and with a passionate curiosity. He let her go, he let her go; and his loneliness remained around him. He sank into his chair again, screened his eyes with his hand; and the lamplight under the green shade furrowed the wrinkles sharply in his worn face of anguish. He stared out before him. What did she know? What did she guess? What had she overheard perhaps . . . in the conservatory, as she came to them? . . . He tried to remember the last words which he had exchanged with Daan. He could not remember. He decided that Ina knew nothing, but that she guessed, because of his increased depression. . . . Oh, if the Thing would only pass! . . . Oh, if the old people would only *die!* . . . Oh, that no one might be left to know! . . . It was enough, it was enough, there had been enough years of self-reproach and silent, inward punishment for people who were so old, so very old. . . .

And he stared, as though he were looking the Thing in the eyes.

He stared all the evening long; sitting in his chair, his face twisted with illness and pain, he fell asleep with the light sleep of old people, quick to

come and quick to go, and he saw himself again, a child of thirteen, in the night in the *pasangrahan* and heard his mother's voice:

"O my God, O my God, no, no, *not* in the river!"

And he saw those three—but young still—his mother, Takma, Ma-Boeten; and between them his father's lifeless body, in the pelting rain of that fatal night. . . .

CHAPTER XX

INA lay awake all night. Yes, curiosity was her passion, had been since her childhood. If she could only know now, now, now! Her husband would give her no assistance, was afraid of complications which might threaten, if they meddled with matters that did not concern them. She herself was curious to the point of imprudence. She now wanted to talk to Uncle Daan, whom she was sure to meet next day at Grandmamma's. . . .

She went that afternoon to the Nassaulaan. Old Anna opened the door, glad that the old lady was not neglected:

"Good-afternoon, ma'am. . . . Mr. Takma, Dr. Roelofsz and Mrs. Floor are upstairs. . . . Yes, you can go up presently. . . . Thank you, the old lady is very well indeed. . . . Yes, yes, she'll outlive us all yet. . . . Would you mind waiting a minute, in the morning-room? We're keeping up a nice fire here now, in the cold weather; for, though the mistress never comes downstairs, as you know, there's usually somebody of the family waiting. . . ."

Old Anna gave Ina a chair. The servant had turned the morning-room into a comfortable waiting-room. This secured that there was never too

much fuss around the old lady, which would not have done at all. The closed stove burnt well. The chairs were arranged in a circle. And the old servant, from politeness, to keep Ina company, stood by her for a moment, talking, till Ina said:

"Sit down, Anna."

The old servant sat down respectfully on the edge of a chair. That was a habit which visitors had adopted with her, because she was so old. She asked politely after Mrs. Lily's little ones.

"The first really fine day, Mrs. van Wely will bring the babies to see their great-great-grandmamma."

"Yes, the mistress will love that," said the old servant; but she jumped up at the same time and exclaimed, "Well, I never! There's Miss Stefanie too! Well, they're certainly not neglecting the old lady!"

She showed Aunt Stefanie de Laders in to Ina and withdrew to the kitchen.

"Mr. Takma, the doctor and Aunt Floor are upstairs," said Ina. "We will wait a little, Aunt. . . . Tell me, Aunt, do you know why Uncle Daan has really come to Holland?"

"Business?" said Stefanie, interrogatively.

"I don't think so. I believe there's something the matter."

"Something the matter?" said Stefanie, with rising interest. "What sort of thing? Something that's not quite proper?"

"I can't tell what it is exactly. As you know, Papa never lets anything out."

"Is Uncle Daan ruined?"

"I thought he might be, but Papa says positively that there is no question of money. As to *what* it is . . ."

"But what could it be?"

"There's *something.*"

They looked into each other's eyes, both of them burning with curiosity.

"How do you know it, Ina?"

"Papa is very much depressed since he's seen Uncle Daan."

"Yes, but *how* do you know that there's something the matter?"

The need to talk overcame Ina's prudence:

"Aunt Stefanie," she whispered, "I really couldn't help it . . . but yesterday, when I went to fetch Uncle Daan and Papa in Uncle's study, I heard . . . in the conservatory . . ."

Aunt Stefanie, eager to learn, tremulously nodded her restless little bird's-head.

"I heard . . . Papa and Uncle Daan talking for a moment. Of course I didn't listen; and they stopped speaking when I went in. But still I heard Uncle Daan say to Papa, 'Have you known it all this time?' And then Papa said, 'Yes, sixty years.'"

"Sixty years?" said Aunt Stefanie, in suspense. "That's ever since Ottilie was born. Perhaps it

had to do with Ottilie. You know, Ina, Aunt Ottilie is . . . "

"Takma's daughter?"

Aunt Stefanie nodded:

"People used to talk a lot about it at one time. They've forgotten it now. It all happened so long ago. Mamma did not behave at all properly. Yes, she has been very sinful."

"Could that be what they were talking about?"

"No, I don't think so. Uncle Daan knew all about it. And Papa would not have said, 'I've known it for sixty years.'"

"No," said Ina, lost in conjecture.

And her usually weary eyes were bright and clear, in their effort to penetrate the vagueness of the Thing which she saw.

"No," said Stefanie, "it can't be that."

"What then?"

"Something . . . about Mamma."

"About Grandmamma?"

"Yes, it's sure to have been about Grandmamma. . . . Sixty years ago. . . ."

"What a long time!" said Ina.

"I was a girl of . . . seventeen," said Aunt Stefanie. "Yes, it was a long time ago."

"And you were seventeen.'

"Yes. . . . That's when Papa Dercksz died."

"Grandpapa?"

"Yes. He was drowned, you know."

"Yes, it dates back to that time."

"Yes. . . . What *can* it be?"

"Do you remember Grandmamma's *baboe?*"

"I do. She was called Ma-Boeten."

"She's dead."

"How do you know?"

"I heard it."

"In the conservatory?"

"Yes, I heard it in the conservatory."

"What else did you hear?"

"Ma-Boeten's son is a *mantri* in the Tegal rent-office."

"Well . . . ?"

"Uncle Daan gives him money."

"Money?"

"Either to speak . . . or to hold his tongue. I believe it's to hold his tongue."

"Then can anything have happened?"

"Sixty years ago? Auntie, *can't* you remember?"

"But, my dear, I was so young, I didn't notice things. I was a girl of seventeen. Yes, yes, Auntie herself was young once. I was seventeen. . . . I and the other children had remained in the town: a sister of Grandmamma's was taking charge of us. Papa had gone to the hills for his health. He and Mamma were staying at a *pasangrahan* and—I remember *this* now—they had taken Harold with them. Yes, I remember, Harold was not with us. They had taken him: Harold was Papa's favourite. . . . It was there that Papa was drowned.

One night, in the *kali*.[1] He was restless, could not sleep, walked into the jungle, missed his way and slipped into the river. I remember all that."

"And Papa was in the *pasangrahan* with them?"

"Yes, your father was with them. He was a little fellow of thirteen then."

"And he has *known*, since then?"

"Is that what he says?"

"Then he must know something . . . about the hills, about the *pasangrahan*. . . ."

"Ina, what *can* it be?"

"I have no idea, Aunt, but it must be something . . . about Grandmamma. . . ."

"Yes," said Aunt Stefanie, with sudden caution; "but, whatever it is, dear . . . it happened so long ago. If it's anything, it's probably something . . . improper. Don't let's rake it up. It is so long ago now, sixty years ago. And Grandmamma is so old. . . ."

She stopped; and her beady bird's-eyes stared and blinked. It was as if she suddenly saw something looming, something that was coming nearer; and she did not want to talk any more. She did not even want to know. A shuddering anxiety, mingled with a mist of vaguest memories, swam in front of her blinking eyes. She would enjoin silence upon it. It was not wise to penetrate too deeply into the things of the past. Years passed, things passed: it was best to let them pass quietly, to let

[1] River.

sin pass by. . . . The powers of Hell lurked in sinfulness. Hell lurked in curiosity. Hell lurked as a devil's sabbath in Anton's books and albums. It lurked in her mother's past. It lurked in Ina's devouring curiosity. She, Aunt Stefanie, was afraid of Hell: she wanted to go to Heaven. She no longer wanted to know what might have happened. And she shut her blinking eyes before the mist of remembrance and kept them closed:

"No, dear," she repeated, "*don't* let us rake it up."

She would not say any more; and Ina was certain that Aunt knew, that Aunt at any rate remembered something. But she knew Aunt Stefanie: she would not speak now, any more than Papa would. Was she on her guard? Oh, what was it, what could it be?

CHAPTER XXI

But Aunt Floor was just coming, shuffling down the stairs with her flopping bosom, and Uncle Daan was just ringing at the front-door. Old Anna was delighted. She loved that bustle of members of the family on the ground-floor and she received everybody with her pleased old face and her meek, civil remarks, while the fat cat under her petticoats arched its back and tail against her legs. Old Dr. Roelofsz came limping down the stairs behind Aunt Floor, hobbling on his one stiff leg; and his enormous paunch seemed to push Aunt Floor on, as she shuffled carefully, step by step.

Aunt Stefanie was glad to get rid of Ina d'Herbourg and said:

"Now *I'll* go upstairs."

She pushed past Roelofsz' stiff leg in the passage and forced her way to the stairs between Daan and Aunt Floor; and, in her nervous hurry, afraid of Ina, of sinfulness, of curiosity, afraid of Hell, she almost stumbled over the cat, which slipped just between her feet.

"I thought I should find you here, Roelofsz," said Uncle Daan. "If I hadn't, I should have looked you up at once."

"Aha, aha, well-well-well, so you're back once more, Dercksz!" said the old doctor.

They shook hands; and Daan Dercksz nervously looked at Dr. Roelofsz, as if he wanted to say something. But he wavered and merely remarked, hesitatingly, to Ina:

"Aren't you going upstairs, Ina?"

"No, Uncle," answered Ina, with apparent politeness, glad to have a word with Dr. Roelofsz. "You go first. Honestly, you go first. I can easily wait a little longer. I'll wait down here."

Dr. Roelofsz joined her in the morning-room, rubbing his cold hands, saying that it was warmer here than upstairs, where they only kept up a small fire: old Takma was never cold; he was always blazing hot inside. But Aunt Floor, who also came into the morning-room for a minute, puffed and put off her heavy fur cloak, Ina helping her:

"A handsome cloak, Aunt."

"Oh, I don't know, child!" said Aunt Floor, disparagingly. "Just an old fur. Had it thr-r-ree year-r-rs. But useful in Gholland: nice and war-r-r-m!"

Inwardly proud of the cloak, she bit the last word into Ina's face, rolling her r's as she did so. They all three sat down and Anna thought it so pleasant of them that she brought in some brandy-cherries, three glasses on a tray:

"Or would you rather have tea, Mrs. Ina?"

"No, Anna, your cherries are delicious."

The servant went away, glad, happy at the bustle on the ground-floor, to which the old lady no longer ever descended. That ground-floor was her kingdom, where not even the companion held sway, where she, Anna, alone held sway, receiving the family and offering refreshments.

Ina tasted a cherry, was sorry that Aunt Floor had joined them in the morning-room. It was quite possible that the old doctor, a younger contemporary of Grandmamma's, knew something; but it was not certain. For Uncle Daan himself had only known it such a little while, though Papa had known it for sixty years. Sixty years! The length of that past hypnotized her. Sixty years ago, that old ailing doctor—who had given up practice and now merely kept Grandmamma and Mr. Takma going, with the aid of a younger colleague—was a young man of twenty-eight, newly-arrived in Java, one of Grandmamma's many adorers.

She saw it before her and tried to see farther into it; her curiosity, like a powerful lens, burnt and revealed a vista in front of her, gleaming with new light, through the opaque denseness of the past. And she began:

"Poor Papa is not at all well. I'm afraid he's going to be ill. He is so depressed mentally too. Yes, Aunt, he has been more depressed, mentally, since he saw Uncle Daan again than I have known him for years. What can it be? It can't be money-matters. . . ."

"No, my dear, it's not money-matters, though we're still as poor as r-r-rats."

"Then what has brought Uncle Daan to Holland?" asked Ina, suddenly and quickly.

Aunt Floor looked at her stupidly:

"What's brought him? . . . Upon my word, child, I don't know. Blessed if I know. Uncle always ghoes r-r-regularly to Gholland . . . on bissiness, bissiness, always bissiness. What they're scheming together now, your Papa and Uncle Daan, blessed if I know; but we sha'n't get rich on it." And she shook her head almost in Ina's face, reproachfully. "And it's year-r-rs that they've been messing about together."

"Poor Papa!" said Ina, sighing.

"Yes-yes-yes, well-well-well," exclaimed the doctor, sitting sideways, with his paunch dangling in front of him, "we're getting old, we're getting old . . ."

"Speak for yourself!" cried Aunt Floor, angrily. "I'm only ssixty."

"Only sixty? Aha, aha!" mumbled the doctor. "Only sixty? I thought you were older."

"I'm only ssixty, I tell you!" said Aunt Floor, wrathfully.

"Yes-yes, then you're the same age . . . as . . . as Ottilie. . . . Well-well, well-well! . . ."

"Yes," said Aunt Floor, "I'm just the same age as Ottilie Steyn."

"Sixty years . . . well-well!" mumbled the doctor.

"You were a young man then, doctor," said Ina, with a little laugh.

"Yes-yes, child, yes-yes . . . a young man!"

"There's a good many years between you and Grandmamma, isn't there?"

"Yes-yes-yes!" said Dr. Roelofsz, confirming the statement vehemently. "Nine years' difference, nine years. . . . And with Takma . . . five years . . . aha, yes, five years . . . that's the difference between him and me . . ."

"It's so nice that you and Grandmamma and Mr. Takma have always kept together," Ina continued, softly. "First in India . . . and afterwards always here, at the Hague."

"Yes-yes, we just kept together. . . ."

"Ssuch old fr-r-riends!" said Aunt Floor, with feeling.

But she winked at Ina, to convey that Dr. Roelofsz, in spite of the difference of nine years, had nevertheless been a very intimate friend of Grandmamma's.

"Doctor," said Ina, suddenly, "is it true that, sixty years ago . . . ?"

She stopped, not knowing what to say. She had begun her sentence like that, craftily, and now broke it off deliberately. The old doctor had a shock: his paunch flung itself from left to right and now hung over his sound leg.

"*Wha-at?*" he almost screamed.

His eyes rolled in his head as he looked at her. Terror distorted the wrinkled roundness of his enormous old head, with the monk's-face, clean-shaven, and the sunken mouth, which was now open, while slaver flowed between the crumbly teeth over the frightened lips. He clenched and raised his old hands, with the skin hanging in loose, untidy folds, and then dropped them on his knee.

He *knew:* Ina saw that at once. And she acted as though his scream was no more than an exclamation following upon a failure to hear, because of his deafness; she raised her voice politely and quietly and repeated in a little louder tone, articulating her words very clearly:

"Is it true that, sixty years ago, Grandmamma —though she was thirty-seven then—was still a gloriously beautiful woman? Yes, those old people took more care of themselves than we do. I'm forty-five, but I'm an old woman. . . ."

"Come, come," said Aunt Floor, "an oldd womann!"

And the doctor mumbled:

"Yes-yes, aha, oh, is that what you were asking, Ina? . . . Yes, yes, certainly: Grandmamma . . . Grandmamma was a splendid, a splendid woman . . . even after she was past her first youth. . . ."

"And what about Ottilie? She was for-r-rty when Steyn fell in love with her."

"Yes," said Ina. "It wasn't . . . quite nice of Aunt Ottilie; but it was a wonderful testimony to her youth. . . ."

And she stared at the doctor with the hidden glance of her well-bred, wearily-blinking eyes. He sat huddled in his chair, an old, decayed, shapeless mass, a heaped-up ruin of a man and a human being, an old, old monk, but wearing a loose frock-coat and loose waistcoat, which draped his broad body. The terror in his rolling eyes had died away; and his glance drooped to the left, his head to the right. It was as though he were seized with inertia, after his fright, after his excessive emotion at Ina's question, at the ominous number of sixty. He nodded his enormous head sagaciously; and, in the wintry light from outside, the shiny top of his head became covered with bright patches.

"Yes-yes-yes, well-well-well!" he mumbled, almost like an idiot.

He rose laboriously, now that Daan Dercksz came downstairs, followed by Stefanie, followed by old Mr. Takma, who refused any assistance on the stairs, though Anna made a point of looking on anxiously, driving away the cat, fearing lest it should slip between the old gentleman's feet.

"Grandmamma is tired," said Daan Dercksz.

"Then I'd better not go up," said Ina. "No, Anna, I think I won't go up. I'll come back some other day soon. Grandmamma has had so many visitors to-day."

Nevertheless she lingered a little and then went away, sick with unsatisfied curiosity, which filled her soul with ravenous hunger. Aunt Stefanie also took her leave, saying that Mamma was poorly to-day; and the last to go was old Takma, calculating his steps carefully, but walking straight and erect. Ina felt that he too must know. What was it, what could it be? Those old people knew, every one of them!

"Come, let's go home, Dhaan," said Aunt Floor. "Our car-r-riage is waiting."

"You go," said Daan Dercksz, hesitating. "I want to talk to Roelofsz first. I'm so glad to see him again. . . ."

"Eh, always talking!" said Aunt Floor, displeased when her husband left her side. "Then I'll send back the car-r-riage for you presently. . . ."

She said good-bye and shuffled away.

"May I see you home, Mr. Takma?" Ina asked.

Takma nodded his consent:

"Do, child," he said, taking her arm.

Though he held himself well and would never have a cab, he always thought it reassuring and pleasant if somebody went back with him, down the Nassaustraat, over the razor-back bridge, to his house on the Mauritskade. He never asked to be accompanied, but was glad to accept when any one offered. Ina, however, reflected that she would not

dare to ask old Mr. Takma anything: imagine, suppose he knew and were also to get a shock, in the street! It would be enough to give him a stroke! No, she was too careful for that, but she was sick and famished with the hunger of curiosity in her soul. What could it be? And how *should* she ever know?

Daan Dercksz remained behind with the old doctor. His parrot-profile shook and his beady bird's-eyes—Aunt Stefanie's eyes—kept blinking as though with excitement, while all his lean figure seemed to shrivel still smaller beside the colossal bulk of the doctor, who towered before him with the figure of a deformed Templar, resting on one leg which was sound and one which was short and limping.

"Well, Roelofsz," said Daan Dercksz, "I *am* glad to see you again."

"Yes-yes, aha, it's quite five years since you were in Holland last. . . . Well-well, that's a long time. . . . We're growing old, we're growing old. . . . You didn't expect to find your mother so fit. . . . Yes-yes, I'll make her see a hundred yet! You wait and see, you wait and see. . . . Perhaps she'll survive us all, Takma and me, yes-yes. . . ."

"Yes," said Daan Dercksz, "Mamma is very little altered."

"She has a splendid constitution, yes-yes, always has had. Her mind's quite clear; her memory is

good; well-well, yes-yes, that's a blessing, at her age. . . ."

"And Takma also . . ."

"Keeps well, keeps well, yes-yes. . . . Well-well, we're all growing old . . . I too, yes-yes, I too. . . ."

But Daan Dercksz was greatly agitated. He had promised his brother Harold to be very careful and not to talk, but, during the two months that he had known, the secret and the horror of it burnt into his soul, the soul of a business-man who, old as he was, for the first time underwent a great emotion outside his business.

And he could not hold himself in check. The house was silent. Anna had gone back to her kitchen; the old lady was sitting upstairs, alone with the companion. A small gas-jet was burning in the morning-room; another in the passage. Afternoon darkness and silence hovered in the atmosphere of the little house in which the old lady had lived so long, had so long sat waiting at her window upstairs, in her high chair. . . .

"Roelofsz," said Daan Dercksz.

He was a head shorter than the doctor; he took hold of a button of the doctor's waistcoat.

"Yes-yes," said Roelofsz. "What is it, Dercksz?"

"Roelofsz . . . I've heard about it."

"*What?*" shouted the doctor, deaf.

"I've heard everything . . . in India."

"*What?*" shouted the doctor, no longer deaf, but dismayed.

"I've heard *everything,* heard it all . . . in India."

The doctor looked at him with rolling eyes; and his pendulous lips slavered in his clean-shaven monk's-face, while his breath panted, reeking between the crumbly teeth.

And he, in his turn, caught hold of one of Daan Dercksz' buttons:

"*What* have you heard?"

"I've heard *everything,*" Daan Dercksz repeated. "Heard it all . . . in India. I know . . . I know everything."

"You know . . . everything? Oh? Oh? You know everything? . . . What . . . what *do* you know?"

"About . . . about Mamma. . . . About Takma. . . . About . . ."

They stood staring into each other's startled eyes.

"About my father," said Daan Dercksz; and his frightened voice sank to a hesitating whisper. "About my father. What you know too. What you have always known. That Takma, that night, when he was with my mother, snatched my father's own weapon from him: a kris which the Regent had given him the day before . . ."

"You know?" cried the doctor. "You know? Oh, my God! Do you know that? I . . . I

have never said a *word*. I am eightee-eight years of age . . . but I've . . . I've never said a *word*."

"No, you never said anything . . . but Mamma's *baboe* . . ."

"Ma-Boeten?"

"Yes, Ma-Boeten told her son, a *mantri* at Tegal. Ma-Boeten is dead and the *mantri* has started blackmailing me. He's been to me for money. I've given him money. I shall give him money every month."

"So you know. . . . Yes-yes, O my God, yes-yes! . . . So you know, Dercksz, you *know?*"

"Yes, I know."

"What did the *mantri* say? What had Ma-Boeten told him? . . ."

"That my father tried to kill Takma, with a kris. . . . That Takma snatched the kris from him, while . . ."

"While what? . . . Yes-yes, while what?"

"While Mamma . . . while my mother . . ."

"Yes-yes?"

"Flung her arms round my father, to prevent him . . ."

"O my God, yes, yes!"

"To prevent him from defending himself . . . and that Ma-Boeten, behind the door, heard her say . . ."

"Yes-yes . . . yes-yes . . . O my God!"

"Heard her say, 'I *hate* you, I *hate* you: I've always hated you . . .'"

"Yes-yes . . . O my God!"

"'I've always hated you and . . . and I love Emile!'"

"Yes-yes . . . and then?"

"And then she called out to Takma, almost aloud, 'Emile, give him a stab: rather he than you!'"

"O . . . my . . . God!"

The doctor sank, in a heavy mass, upon a chair:

"So you *know!*" he moaned. "It's sixty years ago, yes-yes, O my God, yes-yes! I've never spoken about it, *never!* I was so fond of your mother. I . . . I . . . I held an inquest on the body next day!"

"Yes, they let it drift down stream . . . in the *kali* . . ."

"I held an inquest on the body next day . . . and I . . . I *understood*. . . . I had understood it before, for I had seen your mother that morning and she was raving in her delirium . . . and I . . . I promised . . . yes-yes, I promised that I wouldn't tell . . . O my God, O my God . . . if she . . . if she would consent to love me! O my God, O my God, Dercksz, Dercksz, Daan, I have never . . . I have never said a word! . . . And God knows what people, sixty years ago, yes-yes, sixty years ago, didn't think . . . and say . . . and gossip and gossip . . .

without knowing the truth . . . until it was all forgotten . . . until it was too late to hold a fresh inquest, after all those months. . . . I never, never said a *word*. . . . O my God, no-no, no-no! . . ."

"When I knew, Roelofsz, I *couldn't* stay in India. I felt that I must see Harold, see you, see Mamma, see Takma . . ."

"*Why?*"

"I don't know, I had to see you all. Oh, how they must have suffered. I am sorry for her, for Takma. I had to see you, to talk to you about it. I knew that you . . ."

"Did the *mantri* know . . . about *me?*"

"Through Ma-Boeten."

"Yes, she knew everything, the hag!"

"She held her tongue for years. I did not even know that she was alive. And then she told her son. She thought Mamma was dead. The son knew some of the servants at our house. He got to know that Mamma was still alive. . . ."

"O my God, O my God, yes-yes!"

"I give him so much a month."

"Until Mamma dies?"

"Yes . . . until she dies!"

"O my God, O my God, yes-yes!"

"But Roelofsz, what you did *not* know . . ."

"What . . . What? . . . *What* didn't I know?"

"What you did not know is that Harold . . ."

"Harold? Your brother?"

"*Knew!* . . ."

"Harold *knew?*"

"Yes! . . . Yes! . . ."

"He knew? How did Harold know? O my God, O my God! *How* did Harold know?"

"Harold knew . . . because he saw!"

"He saw? Harold saw?"

"He was with them there, in the hills; he was in the *pasangrahan.*"

"Harold?"

"He was a boy of thirteen. He woke up! He saw Mamma, Takma and Ma-Boeten. He saw them carrying his father's body. He stepped in his father's blood, Roelofsz! He was thirteen years old! He was thirteen years old! He has never forgotten what he saw! And he has known it *always,* all his life, all his life long!"

"O my God, O my God! . . . Oh, dear! . . . Is it true? Is it really *true?*"

"It's true! He told me himself."

"And he too . . . did he never tell?"

"No, he never told!"

"He's a good fellow, yes-yes, one of the best of fellows. He does not want to bring disgrace . . . oh, dear . . . on his old mother's head! . . . Daan, Daan . . . O my God! . . . Daan, don't you ever tell: don't *ever* tell!"

"No, I sha'n't tell. I have spoken to you and to Harold, because I discuss everything with him:

business matters and . . . and everything. He's often helped me. . . . He helped me in India, in a nasty affair which I had out there . . . in my time . . . yes . . . O Lord . . . in my time! I've always discussed *everything* with Harold. I spoke to you because I knew that you knew. . . ."

"Well-well-well, yes-yes-yes . . . But Daan, Dercksz, don't speak to any one else!"

"No, no, I sha'n't speak to any one else."

"Not to Stefanie, not to Anton, not to Ottilie . . ."

"*Their* child! . . ."

"Yes-yes, her child and his. Hush-hush, Daan, these are such *old* things, they're all past!"

"If only they were! But they are not past . . . as long as Mamma . . . and Takma . . . are still alive!"

"Yes-yes, yes-yes, you're right: as long as they're alive, those things are not past . . . But, oh, they are so old, he and she! It won't last much longer. They're passing, they're passing, those things . . . slowly, but they're passing. . . . Yes-yes, it's so very long ago. . . . And people no longer trouble about any of us. . . . In the old days, yes, in the old days they, people, used to talk . . . about Mamma and Takma and the children, about Anton, about *you* . . . and that scandal in India . . . about Ottilie: they talked a great deal about Ottilie. . . . That's all

past now . . . . it's passing. . . . . We are old . . . . yes-yes . . . . we are old. . . . . ."

He sank back in his chair; his shapeless bulk collapsed over his slanting paunch, as if it would fall to the floor.

At that moment there came from upstairs a shrill scream, suppressed but penetrating, as though it issued from an old throat that was being strangled; and almost at the same time the door upstairs was flung back and the companion called:

"Anna . . . Anna, come quick!"

Daan Dercksz was an old man, but a shiver ran down his back like ice-cold water. The doctor started, tottering on his legs, and at last drew up his shapeless bulk and cried:

"What is it? What *is* it?"

And the two men hurried up the stairs as fast as they could, with Anna behind them.

There were two lamps alight in the drawing-room; and the old lady was sitting straight up in her chair. Her eyes, enormously dilated, stared from her head in tense dismay; her mouth remained open, after the scream which she had uttered, and formed a dark cavity; and she held one arm uplifted, pointing with an outstretched finger to the corner of the room, near the china-cabinet. Thus she sat, as though petrified and rigid: rigid the staring expression and the open mouth, rigid all the old face, in extreme terror, petrified the gesture of the stiffly-held arm, as though she could never

lower it again. And the companion and Anna, who now went up to her together excitedly, asked:

"Mevrouw, mevrouw, what's the matter? Aren't you well? Aren't you well?"

"*The-ere!*" stammered the old woman. *There! . . . There!*"

And she stared and kept on pointing. The two men had appeared in the doorway and instinctively they all turned their eyes to the corner, near the china-cabinet. There was nothing to be seen save by the eyes of the old lady, nothing save what she saw there—and she alone saw it—rising before her, nothing save what she saw rising in a paroxysm of the remorse that had overwhelmed her for years and years . . . until suddenly she *saw* again, saw for ten or twenty seconds, in which she became petrified and rigid, while the old blood froze in her veins. She now received a shock; her hand fell in her lap; she herself dropped back against the straight pillow of her high-backed chair and her eyes closed . . .

"The mistress has been taken like this before," said old Anna, in a whisper.

They all, all except Daan Dercksz, knew that she had been taken like that before. They crowded round her. She had not fainted. Soon she opened her eyes, knew the doctor, knew the two women, but did not know her son Daan. She glared at him and then gave a sudden shiver, as if she had been struck by a resemblance.

"Mother! Mother!" cried Daan Dercksz.

She still stared, but she now realized that he was not a materialization of what she had just seen, realized that he was a son who resembled his father, the man whom she had first loved and then hated. Her fixed look died away; but the wrinkles in her face, in the later paroxysm of shuddering, remained motionless in their deep grooves, as though etched and bitten in.

Anna stroked her hand and wrist with the soft, regular movement of a light massage, to restore her consciousness entirely . . . until the old blood melted and flowed again.

"To bed," murmured the old lady. "To bed. . . ."

The two men went away, leaving her to the care of the women. At the bottom of the stairs, the dimly-lighted ground-floor shivered, full of shadow silent as the grave. Daan Dercksz took Roelofsz' arm, while the doctor hobbled laboriously down the stairs, from the bad leg on to the sound leg.

"What was it she saw?" asked Daan Dercksz.

"Ssh!" said the old doctor. "Yes-yes . . . yes-yes . . ."

"What did she see?"

"She saw . . . *Dercksz;* she saw . . . *your father!* . . ."

In the kitchen the cat sat mewing with fright.

CHAPTER XXII

Aunt Adèle Takma, with her key-basket on her arm, came fussing quietly from the dining-room into the passage, for she had seen the postman and was hoping for a letter from Elly. Lot and Elly were at Florence, both of them working busily at the Laurentiana and the Archives, where Lot was collecting materials for an historical work on the Medicis. They had been as far as Naples and, on the homeward journey, tired of so much sight-seeing—Italy was quite new to Elly—they had stopped at Florence, settled down in a *pension* and were now working together. Elly seemed happy and wrote enthusiastic letters.

Aunt Adèle looked in the letter-box. Yes, there was a letter from Elly, a letter for Grandpapa. Aunt Adèle always read the letters out to Grandpapa: that was so nice; and after all the letter was for her too. Yes, the children were sure to be away three months longer—it was the beginning of January now—and then the plan was that they would quietly take up their quarters with Steyn and Mamma, for a little while, to see if it answered; and, if it did not answer, they would quietly turn out again and go their own way: they were still keen on travelling and were not yet anxious for a

settled home. Ottilie was in London, where she had her two boys, John and Hugh Trevelley: Mary was in India and married. Mamma had been quite unable to stand it by herself; and there was certainly no harm in her going to look up her two sons . . . if only those two sons had not been such sharks. They were always wanting money: Aunt Adèle knew that from Elly and Lot.

Aunt Adèle finished what she had to do downstairs, spoke to the cook, locked the store-cupboard, smoothed a tablecloth here, put a chair straight there, so that she need not come down again and might have time to read Elly's letter to the old gentleman at her ease. He always liked hearing Elly's letters, because she wrote in a clever and sprightly style; they always gave him a pleasant morning; and he often read them over and over again after Aunt Adèle had read them out to him.

Aunt Adèle now went upstairs, glad at having the letter, and knocked at the door of the old gentleman's study. He did not answer and, thinking that he had gone to his bedroom, she moved on there. The door was open and she walked in. The door between the bedroom and the study was open and she walked in. The old man was sitting in his usual chair, in front of the writing-table.

He was asleep. He sat limply in his chair; and it struck her how very small he looked, as though he had shrunk in his sleep. His eyes appeared to be closed and his hand lay on an open drawer of

his desk. A waste-paper-basket stood beside him; other papers and letters lay scattered over the table.

"He's asleep," she said to herself.

And, so as not to wake him, she stole away on tiptoe through the open door. She did not wish to disturb his rest, if he did not wake of himself through the mere fact of her entering. He was so old, so very old. . . .

She was sorry at having to wait before reading Elly's letter. She had nothing more to do, her housekeeping-duties were finished; the two servants were quietly doing their work. And Aunt Adèle sat down by the window in the dining-room, with her key-basket beside her, glad that everything was nicely tidied, and read the morning paper, which had just come: she would take it up to him presently. It was snowing outside. A still white peace slumbered through the room and through the house. The voice of one of the maids sounded for a moment and died away towards the kitchen. Aunt Adèle quietly read the four pages of the newspaper.

Then she got up, took her basket, the letter and the paper and went upstairs once more. She knocked at the door of the study. But the old man did not reply. She now opened the door. He was still sitting in his chair, in the same attitude of sleep as just now. But he looked even more shrivelled —oh, so very small!—in his short jacket.

Aunt started and came nearer to him. She saw that his eyes were not closed but staring glassily into distant space. . . . Aunt Adèle turned pale and trembled. When she was close to the old gentleman, she saw that he was dead.

He was dead. Death had overtaken him and a slight touch had sufficed to make his blood stand still for good in his worn veins. He was dead and, as it would seem, had died without a struggle, merely because death had come and laid a chill finger on his heart and head.

Aunt Adèle trembled and burst into sobs. She rang the bell and called out in fright for the maids, who came running up at once, the two of them.

"The old gentleman is dead!" cried Aunt Adèle, sobbing.

The two servants also began to cry; they were three women all alone.

"What shall we do, miss?"

"Keetje,"[1] said Aunt Adèle, "go straight to Dr. Thielens and then on to Mr. Steyn de Weert. I don't know of any one else. Your master had no relations. But Mr. Steyn de Weert is sure to help us. Take a cab and go at once. Bring Mr. Steyn straight back with you. Mrs. Steyn is in London. Go, Keetje, go, quick!"

The maid went, crying.

"He's dead," said Aunt Adèle. "The doctor can do nothing for him, but he must give a

[1] Kate, Kittie.

certificate. Door,[1] you and I will lay the master on his bed and undress him gently. . . ."

They lifted the old man out of the chair, Aunt Adèle taking his head, Door his feet: he weighed nothing in the women's hands. He was so light, he was so light! They laid him on the bed and began to undress him. The jacket, when they hung it over a chair, bulged out behind, retained the shape of the old man's back.

Keetje had found Steyn de Weert at home; and he came back with her in the cab: they left word at Dr. Thielens' house; the doctor was out. Aunt Adèle met Steyn in the hall. A still, white peace dozed through the big house downstairs; outside, the snow fell thicker than ever.

"I knew of no one but you, Steyn!" cried Aunt Adèle, sobbing. "And I also sent for you because I knew—the old gentleman told me so—that you're his executor. Yes, he's dead. He went out like a candle. . . . This morning, I brought him his breakfast, as usual. Then he went and sat at his table, looking through some papers. I got a letter from Elly and came upstairs and found him . . . asleep, as I thought. I went away, so as not to wake him. But, when I came back, he was still sitting like that. He was dead. He is dead, Steyn. . . . He was close upon ninety-four."

Steyn remained with Aunt Adèle until the doctor had been and signed the death-certificate; Steyn

[1] Dora.

would see to everything that had to be done. He telegraphed to London to his wife: Aunt Adèle asked him to do this; he telegraphed to Florence to Lot and Elly: they certainly could not get back to the Hague in time for the funeral. And he went on at once to his brother-in-law Harold Dercksz, whom he found at home after lunch:

"Harold," he asked, "what are we to do about Mamma? We can't tell her, can we?"

Harold Dercksz had sunk back into his chair. It was one of his bad days, he was moaning with anguish and, though he did not complain, his face was wrung painfully and his breath came in dull jerks.

"Is . . . is the old man . . . dead?" he asked.

He said nothing more, sat moaning.

"Do you feel so rotten?" asked Steyn.

Harold Dercksz nodded.

"Shall I send for Dr. Thielens to come and see you?"

Harold Dercksz shook his head:

"There's nothing he can do. Thank you, Frans. I know what to do for it: the great thing is to pay no attention to it. . . ."

He was silent again, sat staring in front of him, holding his hand before his eyes because the light outside, reflected by the snow, hurt his face. And he went on breathing with dull, irregular jerks. . . . The old man was dead. . . . The old

man was dead. . . . At last. . . . The Thing, the terrible Thing was passing, was not yet past, was trailing, rustling, staring at him with its fixed, spectral eyes, which he had known ever since his childhood; but it was passing, passing. . . . Oh, how he had looked and looked for the old man's death! He had hated him, the murderer of his father, who had been dear to him when a child; but, first as a child, afterwards as a young man, he had been silent, for his mother's sake, had been silent for sixty years. Only now, quite lately, he had spoken to Daan, because Daan had come from India in dismay, knowing everything, knowing everything at this late date, after the death of the *baboe,* who had spoken to her son, the *mantri.* . . . He had hated him, in his secret self, hated his father's murderer. Then his hatred had cooled, he had come to understand the passion and the self-defence of the crime; then he had felt pity for the old man, who had to carry the burden of his remorse for all those years; then his pity had grown into compassion, deep, quivering compassion for both of them, for Takma and for his mother. . . .

"Give him a stab; rather he than you!"

Oh, that passion, oh, the hatred, of years ago, in the woman that she had then been, a still young and always attractive woman, she who was now dragging out the last years of her life: did she remember? Did she remember, as she sat in her straight-backed chair, in that red twilight of the

window-curtains? . . . He, Harold Dercksz, had longed for the death of Takma, longed for the death of his mother . . . so that for both of them, the old people, the thing, the terrible Thing might have passed entirely and plunged into the depths of what had been. . . . He had longed; and now . . . now the old man was dead!

Harold Dercksz breathed again:

"No, Frans," he said, in his soft, dull voice, "we cannot tell Mother. . . . Remember how very old she is. . . ."

"So I thought. We must keep the old man's death from her at any rate. . . . It won't be possible to keep it from Dr. Roelofsz . . . but it will be a blow to him."

"Yes," said Harold Dercksz. "You've telegraphed to Ottilie?"

"Adèle said I was to."

"Yes," said Harold Dercksz. "She's . . . she's his daughter."

"Did she know it? We never spoke of it."

"I never spoke of it to Mamma either. I believe Ottilie suspected it. You're the executor. . . ."

"So Adèle said."

"Yes," said Harold Dercksz. "He'll have left most of his money . . . to Elly . . . and to Ottilie. When's the funeral?"

"Monday."

"Lot and Elly won't be here."

"No. It won't be possible to wait for them."

"Will the funeral procession go through the Nassaulaan?"

"It's on the way to the cemetery."

"You had better let it go round . . . not past Mamma's house. She's always sitting at the window."

"I'll arrange that."

"How soon can Ottilie be here?"

"She can take the night-boat this evening."

"Yes, she's sure to do that. She suspects . . . she suspects it all; she was very fond of the old man and he of her."

"I must go, Harold. Would you mind telling Dr. Roelofsz?"

"I'll do that certainly. If I can be of any further use . . ."

"No, thank you."

"Let us meet at Mother's this afternoon. We must warn the family as far as possible not to drop the least hint before Mamma; we must keep it from her. The shock would kill her. . . ."

And Harold thought to himself that, if only she were dead, then the Thing would be past; but they had no right to murder her.

When Steyn opened the door, he ran against Ina in the passage. She had been at the window and seen him come; and, curious to know what he wanted to talk about with her father, she had crept upstairs and listened casually.

"Good-morning, Steyn," she said: she did not

call him uncle because of the very slight difference between their ages. "Has anything happened?"

She knew before she asked.

"Old Mr. Takma is dead."

"Ina," said her father, "be sure not to say a word to Grandmamma. We want to keep it from her. It is such a blow for the old lady that it might be the death of her. . . ."

"Yes," said Ina, "we won't say anything to Grandmamma. Mr. Takma was well off, wasn't he? I suppose Elly will get everything? . . ."

"I don't know," said Steyn. "Probably."

"Lot and Elly have become rich all of a sudden."

"Remember, Ina, won't you?" said her father.

He shook hands with Steyn and went straight off to Roelofsz'.

"Did he die during the night?" asked Ina.

Steyn gave the details. He let out that he had telegraphed to Lot and to his wife, Aunt Ottilie.

"Why Aunt Ottilie?"

"Because . . ." said Steyn, hesitating, regretting his slip of the tongue. "It's better she should be there."

Ina understood. Aunt Ottilie was old Takma's daughter: she was sure to get a legacy too.

"How much do you think the old man will leave? . . . Haven't you any idea? Oh, not that it interests me to know: other people's money-matters are *le moindre de mes soucis!* . . . Don't you think Papa very depressed, Steyn? He has been so

depressed since he saw Uncle Daan again. . . . Steyn, don't *you* know why Uncle Daan has come to Holland?"

She was still yearning with curiosity and remained ever unsatisfied. She went about with her gnawing hunger for days and weeks on end; she did not know to whom to turn. The craving to know was constantly with her. It had spoilt her sleep lately. She had tried to start the subject once more with Aunt Stefanie, to get behind it at all costs; but Aunt Stefanie had told her firmly that she—whatever it might be—*refused* to know, because she did not want to have anything to do with old sins and things that were not proper; even though they had to do with her mother, they did not concern *her*. It was Hell lying in wait for them; and, after Aunt Stefanie's penitential homily, Ina knew that she would get nothing out of her aunt, not even the hazy recollection that might have loomed for a moment before her aunt's eyes. What was it, what could it be that Papa had known for sixty years, that Uncle Daan had learnt quite lately and that had brought him to Holland? Oh, to whom, to whom was she to turn?

No, Steyn knew nothing and was surprised at her question, thinking that Daan must have had business to discuss with Harold, as usual. And he went away, hurried off to Stefanie, to Anton, to Daan and Floor, to the Van Welys; and he impressed upon all of them that the old man's death

must be kept from Mamma. They all promised, feeling one and the same need, as children, to keep from their mother the death of the man to whom she had remained so long attached, whom she had seen sitting opposite her, almost every day, on a chair by the window. And Steyn arranged with all of them merely to say that Mr. Takma was unwell and not allowed out . . . and to keep it up, however difficult it might be in the long run.

Then Steyn went to Aunt Adèle; and she asked:

"Couldn't we tidy up those papers in the old gentleman's study, Steyn? It's such a litter. They're all lying just as he left them."

"I'd rather wait till Lot and Elly are back," said Steyn. "All you have to do is to lock the door of the room. There's no need to seal anything up. I've spoken to the solicitor."

He went away; and Aunt Adèle was left alone in the house of death, behind the closed shutters. The old lady, over in the Nassaulaan, so close by, never saw any one except her children and grandchildren: she would not be told. Monday was the funeral. Lot and Elly could not be expected home before Wednesday. It was hard on them, poor children, to be disturbed like that in Italy, in the midst of their work. But still Elly was—to the outside world—the old man's only relation; and she was his heiress. . . .

Aunt Adèle was not grasping. The old man was sure to have left her a handsome legacy: she felt

certain of that. What would upset her was to have to leave the big house: she had lived there so long, had looked after it so very long for the old gentleman. She was fond of it, was fond of every piece of furniture in it. . . . Or would Elly keep the house on? She thought not: Elly considered it gloomy; and it would be too big, thought Aunt Adèle, for Elly was no doubt sharing the money with Ottilie Steyn. . . . Of course, people would talk, though perhaps not so very much; the old gentleman had, so to speak, become dead to the outside world, with the exception of the Dercksz family; and, except Dr. Roelofsz, all his contemporaries were dead. The only survivors of his period were the old lady and the doctor. . . . Yes, she, Aunt Adèle, would certainly have to leave the house; and the thought brought tears to her eyes. How beautifully it was kept, for such an old place! What she regretted was that Steyn had not consented to tidy up the papers in the study. He had locked the door and given her the key. That was the only room, in all the tidy house, with litter and dust in it. Next to the study, in his bedroom, lay the old gentleman: he was to be put into his coffin that evening; Steyn and Dr. Thielens would be there then. The whole house was quiet and tidy around the dead man, except for the dust and litter in the study. The thought irritated Aunt Adèle. And, that afternoon, she took the key and went in. The room had remained as it was when

they lifted the old gentleman out of his chair—so light, oh, so light!—and laid him on his bed and undressed him. . . .

Aunt Adèle opened the windows: the cold wintry air entered and she drew her woollen cape closer over her shoulders. She stood at a loss for a moment, with her duster in her hand, not knowing where to begin. One of the drawers of the writing-table had been left open; there were papers on the table; a waste-paper-basket stood close by; papers lay on the ground. No, she couldn't leave things like that; instead of a crime, it was a kindness to the old man who lay waiting in the next room, lifeless, to put a little order into it all. She collected what she found on the table and tucked it into a letter-wallet. She dusted the desk, arranged everything neatly, pushed the open drawer to and locked it. She picked up what lay on the floor; and she gave a start, for she saw that it was a letter torn across the middle, a letter torn in two. The old gentleman had been tearing up letters: she could see that from the paper-basket, in which the little, torn pieces made white patches. This letter had evidently dropped from his hand at the last moment of all, when death came and tapped him on the heart and head. He had not had the strength to tear up into smaller pieces the letter already torn in two; the two halves had slipped from his fingers and he himself had slid out of life. It touched Aunt Adèle very much; tears came to her eyes. She remained staring ir-

resolutely, with the two pieces in her hand. Should she tear them up? Should she put them away, in the wallet, for Steyn? Better tear them up: the old gentleman had intended to tear them up. And she tore the two pieces in four. . . .

At that moment, an irresistible impulse forced her to glance at the uppermost piece. It was hardly curiosity, for she did not even think that she was holding in her hand anything more than a very innocent letter—the old gentleman kept so many—a letter, among a hundred others, which he had gradually come to the conclusion that he would do well to destroy. It was hardly curiosity: it was a pressure from without, an impulse from outside herself, a force compelling her against her honest conviction. She did not resist it: she read; and, as she read, the idea rose clearly within her to finish tearing up the letter and drop the pieces in the basket.

Yet she did not do so: she read on. She turned pale. She was a simple-minded, placid woman, who had reached years of maturity calmly, with healthy, unstirred blood, foreign to all violent passion. Reading had left her soul untouched; and burning sentences, she thought, were invented by the authors for the sake of fine writing. The fact that words could be written down such as she now read, on paper yellow with age, in ink pale-red with age, struck her with consternation, as though a red flame had burst forth from smouldering ashes which

she was raking. She never knew that such a thing could be. She did not know that those violent glowing words could be uttered just like that. They hypnotized her. She had sunk into the old man's chair and she read, unable to do anything but read. She read of burning things, of passion which she had never suspected, of a melting together of body and soul, a fusion of souls, a fusion of bodies, only to forget, at all costs to forget. She read, in a frenzy of words, of a purple madness exciting itself in order to plunge and annihilate two people in each other's soul and, with undiscovered kisses, to burn away and melt away in oblivion, in oblivion. . . .

To melt into each other and never to be apart again. . . . To be together for ever. . . . To be inseparable for ever in unquenchable passion. . . . To remain so and to forget. . . . Especially to forget, O God, to forget . . . that one night, that night! . . . And through the first passionate purple words there now began to flow the purple of blood. . . . Through the words of passionate love there now flowed words of passionate hatred. . . . The frenzied joy that this hatred had cooled after all. . . . The jubilant assurance that, if that night could ever recur, the hatred would cool a second time! The mad words deceived themselves, for, immediately after, they again writhed in despair and declared that nevertheless, in spite of satisfied passion, the memory was as a spectre, a bloody spectre, that never left you.

. . . Oh, the hatred would always cool like that, for a third time, for a fourth time . . . but yet the bloody spectre remained horrible! . . . It was maddening. . . . It was maddening. . . . And the letter ended with an entreaty that he would come, come speedily, to blend with her in soul and body and, in the rapture of it, to forget and no longer to behold the spectre. At the bottom of the letter were the words, "Tear this up at once," and the name:

"OTTILIE."

Aunt Adèle remained sitting motionless, with the four pieces in her hand. She had read the letter: it was irrevocable. She wished that she had not read it. But it was too late now. And she knew. . . .

The letter was dated from Tegal, sixty years ago. Flames no longer flickered out of the words, now that Aunt Adèle had read them, but the scarlet quivered before her terrified eyes. She sat huddled and trembling and her eyes stared at that quivering scarlet. She felt her knees shake; they would not let her rise from her chair. And she *know*. Through a welter of hatred, passion, jubilation, madness, passionate love and passionate remorse, the letter was clear and conjured up—as in an unconscious impulse to tell everything, to feel everything over again, to describe everything in crimson clearness—a night of years and years ago, a night in silent mountains, by a dark jungle, by a river in flood, a night in a

lonely *pasangrahan,* a night of love, a night of hatred, of surprise, of self-defence, of not knowing how, of rising terror, of despair to the pitch of madness. . . . And the words conjured up a scene of struggle and bloodshed in a bedroom, conjured up a group of three people who carried a corpse towards that river in flood, not knowing what else to do, while the pouring rain streamed and clattered down. . . . All this the words conjured up, as though suggested by a force from the outside, an impulse irresistible, a mystic violence compelling the writer to say what, logically speaking, she should have kept hidden all her life long; to describe in black on white the thing that was a crime, until her letter became an accusation; to scream it all out and to paint in bright colours the thing which it would have been safest to keep buried in a remorseful soul and to erase, so that not a trace remained to betray it. . . .

And the simple, placid woman, grown to mature years in calmness of blood, sat dismayed at what had been revealed to her. At first, her dismay had shone red in front of her, dismay at an evocation of hatred and passionate love; and now, suddenly, there rose before her eyes the drawing-room of an old woman and the woman herself sitting at a window, brittle with the lasting years, and, opposite her, Takma, both silently awaiting the passing. The old woman sat there still; yonder, in the next room, lay the old man and he too awaited the morrow and

the last honours: for to-day everything was past. . . .

O God, so *that* was the secret of their two old lives! So vehemently had they loved, so violently hated, so tragic and ever-secret a crime had they committed in that lonely mountain night and such blood-red memories had they dragged with them, always and always, all their long, long lives! And now, suddenly, she alone knew what nobody knew! . . . She alone knew, she thought; and she shuddered with dread. What was she to do with that knowledge, what was she to do with those four pieces of yellow paper, covered with pale-red ink as though with faded letters of blood? . . . What was she to do, what was she to do with it all? . . . Her fingers refused to tear those four pieces into smaller pieces and to drop them into the paper-basket. It would make her seem an accomplice. And what was she to do with her knowledge, with what she alone knew? . . . That tragic knowledge would oppress her, the simple-minded woman, to stifling-point! . . .

Now at last she rose, shivering. It was very cold in the aired room. She went to the window to close it and felt her feet tottering, her knees knocking together. Her eyes staring in dismay, she shook her head to and fro, to and fro. Mechanically, with her duster in her hand, she dusted here and there, absent-mindedly, constantly returning to the same place, dusting two and three times over. Mechani-

cally she put the chairs straight; and her habit of neatness was such that, when she left the room, she was still trembling, but the room was tidy. She had locked up the torn letter. She could not destroy it. And suddenly she was seized with a fresh curiosity, a fresh impulse from without, a strange feeling that compelled her: she wanted to see the old man. . . . And she entered the death-chamber on the tips of her slippered toes. In the pale dim light, the old man's head lay white on the white pillow, on the bed with its white counterpane. The eyelids were closed; the face had fallen away on either side of the nose and mouth in loose wrinkles of discoloured parchment; there were a few scanty grey hairs near the ears, like a dull silver wreath. And Aunt Adèle looked down upon him, with eyes starting from their sockets, and shook her head to and fro in dismay. There he lay, dead. She had known him and looked after him for years. She had never suspected *that*. There he lay, dead; and in his dead relics lay all the past passionate love and hatred; surely too the past remorse and remembrance. Or was there a hereafter yet to come, with more struggling and more remorse and penitence . . . and punishment perhaps? . . .

Whatever he might have suffered within himself, he had not been fully punished here on earth. His life, outwardly, had flowed long and calmly. He had achieved consideration, almost riches. He had not had an ailing old age. On the contrary, his

senses had remained unimpaired; and she remembered that he even used often to complain, laughing in his genial manner—which was too pronounced to be sincere—that he heard everything and was far from growing deaf with age, that in fact he heard voices which did not exist. What voices had he heard, what voice had he heard calling? What voice had called to him when the letter, half-destroyed and too long preserved, dropped from the hand that played him false? . . . No, in this world he had not been fully punished, unless indeed his whole life was a punishment. . . . A cold shiver passed through Aunt Adèle: that a person could live for years beside another and not know him and know nothing about him! How long was it? For twenty-three years, she, the poor relation, had lived with him like that! . . . And the old woman also lived like that. . . .

Shaking her head in stupefaction, Aunt Adèle moved away. She clasped her hands together, gently, with an old maid's gesture. She saw the old woman in her imagination. The old woman was sitting, dignified and majestic, frail and thin, in her high-backed chair. She had once been the woman who was able to write that letter full of words red with passion and hatred and madness and the wish to forget, in a fusion of the senses with him, with him who lay there so insignificant, so small, so old, dead now, after years and years. She had once been able to write like that! . . .

The words still burnt before the eyes of the stupefied elderly woman, placid in soul and blood. That such things were, that such things could be! .. .. ..
Her head kept shaking to and fro. .. .. ..

CHAPTER XXIII

NEXT morning, Ottilie Steyn de Weert arrived at the Hook of Holland. She was accompanied by a young fellow of nearly thirty, a good-looking, well-set-up young Englishman, clean-shaven, pink and white under his travelling-cap, broad-shouldered in his check jacket and knickerbockers. They took the train to the Hague.

Ottilie Steyn was under the influence of emotion. She could be silent when she wished and so she had never spoken about it; but she suspected, she knew almost for certain that Takma was her father and she had loved him as a father.

"He was always so good to me," she said, in English, to Hugh Trevelley, her son. "I shall miss him badly."

"He was your father," said Hugh, coolly.

"Not at all," Ottilie protested. "You know nothing about it, Hugh. People are always talking."

"He gave you the money to come to England."

Mamma Ottilie did not know why, but she was sometimes more sincere with Hugh than she was with Lot at home. She loved both these two sons, but she loved Lot because he was kind to her and she was really fonder of Hugh because he was

so good-looking and broad-shouldered and because he reminded her of Trevelley, whom she had really loved the best. She had never told Lot that the old gentleman was very generous to her, but she had sometimes said so to Hugh. She was glad to be travelling with Hugh, to be sitting next to him; and yet she was not pleased that Hugh had come with her. He never came to the Hague; and it only meant complications with Steyn, she thought, especially now.

"Hugh," she said, caressingly, taking his hand and holding it between hers, "Hugh, Mummy is so glad to be with you, my boy. I see you so seldom. I'm very glad. . . . But perhaps you would have done better not to come."

"I daresay," said Hugh, coolly, withdrawing his hand.

"Because of Steyn, you know."

"I won't see the fellow. I sha'n't set foot in your house. I'll go to an hotel. Do you think I want to see that scoundrel? That cad . . . for whom you left my father? Not I! But I've come to look after my interests. I sha'n't make any trouble. But I want to know. You're coming into money from that old man. He's your father, I know he is. You're sure to come into money. All I want is to know how things stand: whether he leaves you any money and how much. As soon as I know that, I shall go back. For the rest, I sha'n't trouble any one, not even you."

Ottilie sat looking in front of her, like a child that has been rebuked. They were alone in the compartment; and she said, coaxingly:

"Boy, dear boy, don't talk like that to your mother. I'm so glad to have you with me. I'm so very, very fond of you. You're so like your father and I loved your father, oh, more than Steyn, ever so much more than Steyn! Steyn has wrecked my life. I ought to have stayed with your father and all of you, with you and John and Mary. Don't speak so harshly, my boy. It hurts me so. Do be nice again to your mother. She has nothing, nothing left in her life: Lot is married; the old man is dead. She has nothing left. No one will ever be nice to her again, if you aren't. And in the old days . . . in the old days everybody used to be so very nice to her; yes, in the old days . . ."

She began to cry. It came from her regret for the old man, from her anger about Lot, who was married, from her jealousy of Elly and her pity for herself. Her fingers, like a little child's, felt for Hugh's strong hand. He smiled with his handsome, clean-shaven mouth, thought her funny for such an old woman, but realized that she might have been very charming once. A certain kindness showed itself in him and, with bluff tenderness, putting his arm round her waist, he said:

"Come, don't start crying; come here."

And he drew her to him. She crept up against him like a child, nestled against his tweed jacket;

he patted her hand; and, when he kissed her on the forehead, she was blissfully happy and lay like that, with a deep sigh, while he, smiling and shaking his head, looked down on his mother.

"Which hotel are you going to?" she asked.

"The Deux-Villes," he said. "Have you any more money for me?"

"No, Hugh," she replied, "I gave it you all, for the tickets and . . ."

"All you had on you?"

"Yes, boy, really, I haven't a cent in my purse. But I don't want it. You can keep what's left."

He felt in his pocket:

"It's not much," he said, rummaging among his change. "You can give me some more at the Hague. One of these days, when I'm well off, you can come and live with me and enjoy a happy old age."

She laughed, pleased at his words, and stroked his cheeks and gave him a kiss, as she never did to Lot. She really doted on him; he was her favourite son. For one word of rough kindness from Hugh she would have walked miles; one kiss from him made her happy, positively happy, for an hour. To win him, her voice and her caress unconsciously regained something of their former youthful seductiveness. Hugh never saw her as a little fury, as Lot often did, Lot whom in the past she had sometimes struck, against whom she even now sometimes felt an impulse to raise her quick

little hand. She never felt that impulse towards Hugh. His manliness, a son's manliness, mastered her; and she did whatever he wished. Where she loved manliness, she surrendered herself; she had always done so and she now did so to her son.

On arriving at the Hague, she took leave of Hugh and promised to keep him informed, imploring him to be nice and not to do anything disagreeable. He promised and went his way. At home, she found her husband waiting for her.

"How did the old man die?" she asked.

He gave her a few brief details and said:

"I'm the executor."

"You?" she asked. "Why not Lot, as Elly's husband?"

He shrugged his shoulders, thought it disingenuous in her to ask:

"I don't know," he said, coldly. "The old man arranged it so. Besides, I shall do everything with Lot. He may be here in two days. The undertakers are coming to-night; the funeral will be to-morrow."

"Can't it wait for Lot?"

"Dr. Thielens thought it inadvisable."

She did not tell him that Hugh had come with her and, after lunch, she went to the Mauritskade and embraced Adèle Takma, who was bearing up though the red letters still whirled before her stupefied eyes, like faded characters written in blood. Ottilie Steyn asked to see the old gentleman for

the last time. She saw him, white in the pale, dim light, his old white face on the white pillow, with its scanty little wreath of hair, his eyelids closed, the lines on either side of his nose and mouth fallen away in slack wrinkles of discoloured parchment. She wrung her hands softly and wept. She had been very fond of the old man and he had always been exceedingly kind to her. Like a father . . . like a father . . . she always remembered him like that. Papa Dercksz she had never known. *He,* he had been her father. He had petted her even as a child; and afterwards he had always helped her, when in any sort of money trouble. If ever he reproached her, it had always been gently . . . because she played with her life so: that was his expression at the time of her first divorce, from Pauws; of her second divorce, from Trevelley. She remembered it all: in India and at the Hague. He had liked Pauws very much; Trevelley he disliked; Steyn he had ended by pronouncing to be a good fellow after all. Yes, he had never reproached her except gently, because she was unable to manage herself and her love-affairs; and he had always been so exceedingly kind to her. . . . She would miss him, in the morning-room at Mamma's, or on the days when she used to look him up in his study and he would give her a couple of banknotes, with a kiss, saying:

"But don't talk about it."

He had never said that he was her father; she

had always called him Mr. Takma. But she had suspected; and she now felt it, knew it for certain. This affection, perhaps the last, was passing from her, had passed from her. . . .

She went again in the evening, with Steyn, and Dr. Thielens came too, to be present when the body was put in the coffin. Aunt Adèle said, no, she was not afraid of being in the house with the corpse, nor the maids either: they had slept quite well the night before. Next day also, the day of the funeral, Aunt Adèle was composed. She received Dr. Roelofsz very quietly; the doctor panted and groaned and pressed his hands to his stomach, which hung crooked: he had intended to go to the cemetery with the rest, but did not feel equal to it; and so he stayed behind with Adèle. The Derckszes came: Anton and Harold and Daan; Steyn came; D'Herbourg came, with his son-in-law Frits van Wely; and the women came too: Ottilie Steyn, Aunt Stefanie, Aunt Floor, Ina and the fair-haired little bride, Lily; they all remained with Dr. Roelofsz and Aunt Adèle, who was quite composed. When the funeral procession was gone, the women said how sad it was for Grandmamma; and the old doctor began to cry. It was a pitiful sight, to see that old man, shapeless as a crumbling mass, huddled in a chair; to hear him exclaim, "Well-well . . . yes-yes . . . oh, yes!" to see him cry; but Adèle remained composed. Ottilie Steyn was not so; she wept bitterly; and they all saw that she was mourn-

ing the death of a father, though not any of them had uttered the word, not even quietly among themselves.

Next morning, Steyn had an interview with the solicitor; and, when he came home, he said to his wife:

"Adèle has a legacy of thirty thousand guilders; Elly and you get something over a hundred thousand each."

Mamma Ottilie sobbed:

"The dear good man!" she stammered through her sobs. "The dear good man!"

"Only we thought, Ottilie, the solicitor and I thought, that it would be best, for Mamma's sake to speak of the inheritance as little as possible."

"Does the old gentleman acknowledge me as his daughter?"

"There is no question of acknowledging. He leaves you the half of his property; you and Elly share and share alike, after deducting Adèle's legacy. Only we thought, the solicitor and I, that, for Mamma's sake, it would be better not to talk about it to any one who needn't know."

"Yes," said Ottilie, "very well."

"You can be silent when you choose, you know."

She looked at him:

"I shall not talk about it. But why do you say that?"

"Because I see from the old gentleman's books

that he often used to give you money. At least there are entries: 'To O. S.'"

She flushed up:

"I wasn't obliged to tell you."

"No, but you always used to say that you had found some money in your cupboard and make yourself out more careless than you were."

"The old man himself asked me not to talk about that money. . . ."

"And you were quite right not to. I only say, you can be silent when you *choose*. So be silent now."

"I don't want your advice, thank you!" she blazed out; but he had left the room.

She clenched her fist: oh, she hated him, she hated him, especially for his voice! She could not stand his cold, bass voice, his deep, measured words. She hated him: she could have smacked his face, just to see if he would then still speak in cool, deliberate tones. She hated him more and more every day. She hated him so much that she longed for his death. She had wept beside the old man's body; she could have danced beside Steyn's! Oh, she didn't yet realize how she hated him! She pictured him dead, run over, or wounded to the death, with a knife in his heart or a bullet through his temple . . . and she knew that she would then rejoice within herself. It was all because he spoke so coolly and deliberately and never said a kind word to her now and never caressed her! . . .

"A hundred thousand guilders!" she thought. "It's a lot of money. Ah, I'd rather the dear good man were still alive! And that now and then, in that kind way of his, he gave me a couple of hundred guilders. That's what I shall miss so terribly. It's true, I have some money now; but I have nothing else left!"

And she wrung her hands and sobbed again, for she felt very lonely: the old man was dead; Hugh at the Hague, but in his hotel; fortunately, Lot was coming home that evening. . . . .

CHAPTER XXIV.

THEY arrived in the evening, on the day after the funeral, Lot and Elly, tired from the journey and out of harmony amid their actual sorrow. Aunt Adèle—they were to stay in the Mauritskade—did not notice it at once; for she, after bearing up for the last two days, had thrown herself sobbing in Elly's arms, sobbing as Elly had never seen her; and, when the sobs gave themselves free scope, her nerves gave out and she fell in a faint.

"The mistress has had such a busy, upsetting time," said Door; and Keetje confirmed it; and they and Elly brought Aunt Adèle round.

"I'm better, dear, it's nothing. Come, let's go to the dining-room. I expect you two will be glad of something to eat."

She was still sobbing, overwrought, but she steadied herself with an effort. When they were seated at dinner, she noticed Lot's and Elly's lack of harmony.

"Was Grandpapa buried yesterday?" asked Elly.

"Yes, dear. Dr. Thielens dared not wait any longer."

"Then it was really superfluous for us to come home," said Lot, irritably.

His lips trembled and there was a set hardness in his usually gentle, pink-and-white face.

"We telegraphed to you to come," said Aunt Adèle, still crying, softly, "because Elly will have to go into business-matters at once . . ."

"Perhaps I might have come home by myself," said Elly, "for these matters of business. . . ."

"Steyn is the executor," said Aunt Adèle, gently, "and he thought . . ."

"Steyn?" asked Elly. "Why not Lot?"

"The old man had settled it so, dear. . . . He's the husband of Mamma . . . who comes into money too . . . with you . . ."

"Mamma?" asked Lot.

"Yes," said Aunt Adèle, a little embarrassed.

They understood and asked no more questions, but it was obvious that they were out of harmony; their features looked both tired and hard.

"Mamma is coming this evening to see you," said Aunt Adèle.

Elly shook her head:

"I'm dead-tired," she said. "I can't see Mamma this evening. I'm going up to bed, Auntie."

"*I'll* see Mamma," said Lot.

Elly rose quickly and went upstairs. Aunt Adèle followed her; and Lot went to another room to change his things. On the stairs, Elly began to cry:

"Poor old Grandpapa!" she sobbed; and her voice broke.

They reached the bedroom. Aunt Adèle helped her undress.

"Are you so tired, dear?"

Elly nodded.

"Dear, is anything the matter? You've something so hard about your face, something I've never seen there before. . . . Tell me, dear, you are happy, aren't you?"

Elly gave a vague smile:

"Not quite as happy perhaps as I expected, Auntie. . . . But, if I'm not, it's my own fault."

Aunt Adèle asked nothing more. She thought of the elated letters which had always given the old man such pleasant moments and reflected how deceptive letters could be.

Elly undressed and got into bed.

"I'll leave you to yourself, dear. . . ."

But Elly took her hand, with a sudden tenderness for the woman who had been a mother to her:

"Stay a little longer, Auntie . . . until Mamma comes."

"Dear," said Aunt Adèle, feeling her way, "you're not put out, are you, because Mamma inherits her share too. She's his daughter, you know. . . ."

"Yes, Auntie, I know that. No, Auntie, really I'm not put out at that. I'm only tired, very tired . . . because everything that we set ourselves to do . . . seems useless. . . ."

"Darling," said Aunt Adèle, only half hearing,

"I also . . . am tired, I am worn out. Oh, I wish I dared tell you! . . ."

"What?"

"No, dear, no, I daren't."

"But what is it?"

"No, dear, I daren't. Not yet, not yet, perhaps later. . . . Hark, there's the bell: that must be Mamma. . . . Yes, I hear Steyn's voice too. . . . I'd better go downstairs, dear. . . ."

She left Elly, but was so much upset that downstairs she once more burst into tears. . . .

"Elly is so tired," she said to Ottilie, "she's gone to bed: I should leave her alone to-day, if I were you. . . ."

But she herself was quite unhinged. She felt that the terrible secret which she alone knew—so she thought—weighed too heavily on her simple soul, that she was being crushed by it, that she must tell it, that she must share it with another. And she said:

"Steyn, Steyn. . . . While Lot is talking to his mother, don't you know, I'd like to speak to you . . . if I may. . . ."

"Certainly," said Steyn.

They left the room.

"Upstairs?" asked Steyn.

"Yes," said Aunt Adèle, "in the old gentleman's room."

She took him there: it was cold, but she lit the gas.

"Steyn," she said, "I'm sorry for what I've done. I tidied up those papers a bit, there was such a litter. And on the ground was a . . . a letter, a torn letter: the last one . . . which the old gentleman meant to tear up. . . . I don't know how it happened, Steyn . . . but, without intending to or knowing it, I . . . I read that letter. . . . I would give all the money in the world not to have done it. I *can't* keep it to myself, all to myself. It's driving me crazy . . . and slowly making me frightened . . . and nervous. . . . See, here's the letter. I don't know if I'm doing right. Perhaps I'd have done better just to tear the letter up. . . . After all, that was the old man's wish. . . ."

She gave him the four pieces.

"But then it will be best," said Steyn, "for me to tear up the letter . . . and not read it. . . ."

And he made a movement as though to tear the letter. But she stopped him:

"And leave *me* . . . to carry about with me . . . all by myself . . . something that I can't speak of! No, no, read it, in Heaven's name . . . for *my* sake, Steyn . . . to share it with me. . . . Read it. . . ."

Steyn read the letter.

Silence filled the room: a cold, lonely, wintry, silence, with not a sound but that of the flaring gas. From the faded characters of the frayed, yellow letter, torn in part, rose hatred, passion, mad jubila-

tion, mad agony of love and remorse for a night of blood, an Indian mountain night, clattering with torrents of rain. With all of that these two had nothing to do; they were foreign to it; and yet the Thing that was passing brushed against their bodies, their souls, their lives. It made them start, reflect, look each other shudderingly in the eyes, strangers though they were to the Thing that was passing. . . .

"It is terrible," said Steyn. "And no one knows it? . . ."

"No," said Aunt Adèle, "no one knows it except you and me. . . ."

But Steyn was not satisfied:

"We ought not to have read that letter," he said.

"I don't know how I came to do it," said Aunt Adèle. "Something impelled me to, I don't know what. I'm not naturally inquisitive. I had the pieces in my hand to tear them up still smaller. I tore the two pieces into four. . . ."

Mechanically, Steyn tore the four pieces into eight.

"What are you doing?" asked Aunt Adèle.

"Destroying the letter," said Steyn.

"Wouldn't you let Lot . . . ?"

"No, no," said Steyn, "what does Lot want with it? *There!* . . ."

He tore up the letter and dropped the pieces, very small, into the paper-basket.

Before his eyes shimmered pale-red the bygone

passions that were strange to him; they loomed up before him; and yet he saw the room, wintry-cold and silently abandoned by the old man, with not a sound in it save the flaring gas.

"Yes," said Aunt Adèle, "perhaps it's better that no one should know . . . except ourselves. . . . Oh, Steyn, it *has* relieved me . . . that you should know, that you should know! . . . Oh, how dreadful life is, for such things to happen!"

She wrung her hands, shook her head from side to side.

"Come," said Steyn; and his great frame shuddered. "Come, let's go. . . ."

Aunt Adèle, trembling, turned out the gas.

They went downstairs.

The dark room remained wintry and silently abandoned.

The letter lay in the basket, torn up very small. . . .

CHAPTER XXV

"Oh dear!" said old Anna, with a sigh. "We can't possibly keep it a secret from the mistress always!"

She moaned and groaned and, raising her two arms in the air, drove the cat back to the kitchen, because the passage was full enough as it was: Ina d'Herbourg had arrived with her daughter Lily van Wely and two perambulators; one was pushed by the little mother and the other by the nurse; and Lily and the nurse now shoved the perambulators into the morning-room, where Anna had made up a good fire, to welcome the family; and, while Lily and the nurse were busy, Ina talked to old Anna about the old gentleman's death and Anna said that her mistress had not the least idea of it, but that, after all, that couldn't go on forever. . . .

"Oh, what darlings, what sweet little dots!" said Anna, clasping her hands together. "And how pleased the mistress will be that Mrs. Lily has come to show her the babies! Yes, I'll let the old lady know. . . ."

"Lily," said Ina, "you go first with Stefje; I'll come up afterwards with little Netta."

Lily took the baby out of the perambulator. The child whimpered a bit and crowed a bit; and the dear, flaxen-haired little mother, with her very

young little motherly laugh, carried it up the stairs. Anna was holding the door open and the old lady was looking out. She was sitting upright in her high-backed chair, which was like a throne, with the pillow straight behind her back. In the light of the early winter afternoon, which filtered through the muslin blinds past the red curtains and over the plush valance, she seemed frailer than ever; and her face, brightened with a smile of expectation, was like a piece of lined white porcelain, but so vaguely seen under the even, hard-black, just-suggested line of the wig and the little lace cap that she did not seem to belong to the world of living things. The ample black dress fell in supple lines and hid her entirely in shadow-folds with streaks of brighter light; and, now that Lily entered with the baby, the old woman lifted from her deep lap her trembling, mittened hands, with fingers like slender wands, lifted them into a stiff and difficult gesture of caress and welcome. Long cracked sounded the voice, still round and mellow with its Indian accent:

"Well, child, that's a nice idea of yours, to bring the little boy at last. . . . That's a nice idea. . . . That's a nice idea. . . . Yes, let me have a look at him. . . . Oh, what a sweet baby!"

Lily, to let Great-great-grandmother see the baby well, had knelt down on a hassock and was holding up the baby, which shrank back, a little startled at the brittle, wrinkled face that made such an uncanny

patch in the crimson dusk; but its little mother was able to hush it and it did not cry, only stared.

"Yes, Greatgranny," said Lily, "this is your great-great-grandchild."

"Yes, yes," said the old woman, with her hands still trembling in the air, in a vague gesture of hesitating caress, "I'm a great-great-grandmamma. . . . Yes, little boy, yes . . . I'm your great-great-grandmother. . . ."

"And Netta's downstairs: I brought her too."

"Oh, your little girl! . . . Is she here too?"

"Yes, would you like to see her presently?"

"Yes, I want to see them both. . . . Both together, together. . . ."

The little boy, hushed, looked with wondering earnestness at the wrinkled face, looked with a wavering glance of reflection and amazement, but did not cry; and, even when the slender, wand-like finger tickled him on his cheek, Lily was able to hush him and keep him from crying. It was a diversion too when Ina came upstairs with Netta on her arm: a bundle of white and a little pink patch for a face and two little drops of turquoise eyes, with a moist little munching mouth; and Lily was afraid that the little boy would start screaming and handed him to the nurse at the door: fortunately, for on the landing he opened his throat lustily, greatly perturbed in his baby brain by his first sight of great age. But the bundle of white and the little pink patch with the two little drops of turquoise munched away

contentedly with the moist little mouth and was even better-behaved than Stefje had been, so well-behaved indeed that the old woman was allowed to take it for a moment in her deep lap, though Lily remained on her guard and kept her hands under it.

"That's made me very happy, dear," said the old woman, "to have seen my great-great-grandchildren. Yes, Stefje is a fine little man . . . and Netta is a darling, Netta is a darling. . . . ."

It was time to say good-bye; and Lily carried off the pink-patched bundle of white, saying, in her laughing, young-motherly way, that the children must go home. Ina sat down.

"It has really made me happy," the old woman repeated, "to have seen that young life. For I have been very sad lately, Ina. It must be quite ten days since I saw Mr. Takma."

"No, Granny, it's not so long as that."

"How long has he been ill then?"

"Six days, seven perhaps."

"I thought it was quite ten days. And Dr. Roelofsz comes so seldom too. . . . Yes, that chair by the window . . . has been empty now a whole week. . . . I thought it was ten days. . . . It's cold, raw weather, isn't it? . . . I don't feel it in here. . . . But, oh, even if that gets better . . . it will take a very long time . . . and Mr. Takma won't come again this winter! . . ."

Her dry old eyes did not weep, but her cracked voice wept. Ina could not find much more to say,

but she did not want to go away yet. She had come with the children, in the hope of hearing something perhaps at Grandmamma's. . . . She still did not know. She still knew nothing; and there was so much to know. There was first the great Something, that which had happened sixty years ago: Grandmamma *must* know about it, but she dared not broach the Something at Grandmamma's, afraid lest she should be touching upon the very Past. If it *was* anything, then it might make the old woman ill, might cause her sudden death. . . . No, Ina looked forward in particular to seeing any one who might call that afternoon, to having talks in the morning-room downstairs, for there were more things to know: how much Elly had come into; and whether Aunt Ottilie had also come in for her share. . . . All this was hovering in vagueness: she could not get to the bottom of it; she *must* manage to get to the bottom of it that afternoon. . . . So she sat on quietly; and the old lady, who did not like being alone, thought it pleasant when she made an occasional remark. But, when it lasted too long before any one else came, Ina got up, said good-bye, went downstairs, chatted a bit with Anna and even then did not go, but sat down in the morning-room and said:

"Sit down too, Anna."

And the old servant sat down respectfully on the edge of a chair; and they talked about the old man:

"Mrs. Elly is well-off, now," said Ina. "Don't *you* know how much the old gentleman left?"

But Anna knew nothing, merely thought—and said so with a little wink—that Mrs. Ottilie would be sure to get something too. But there was a ring at the door; and it was Stefanie de Laders, tripping along very nervously:

"Doesn't Mamma know yet?" she whispered, after Anna had returned to the kitchen.

"No," said Ina, "Grandmamma doesn't know, but she sits looking so mournfully at Mr. Takma's empty chair."

"Is there no one with her?"

"No, only the companion."

"I have a great piece of news," said Stefanie.

Ina pricked up her ears; and her whole being was thrilled.

"*What,* Aunt?"

"Only think, I've had a letter from Thérèse . . ."

"From Aunt Thérèse in Paris? . . ."

"Yes, from Aunt van der Staff. She's coming to the Hague. She writes that she felt something urging her, something impelling her, while she was saying her prayers—we know those Roman Catholic prayers!—something impelling her to come to the Hague and see Mamma. She hasn't seen Mamma for years. She hasn't been to the Hague for years, which wasn't at all the thing. . . . What does she want to come here for now, exciting Mamma perhaps, with her popery, in her old age!"

It was a very great piece of news and Ina's usually weary, well-bred eyes glistened.

"What! Is Aunt Thérèse coming here?"

It was a most important piece of news.

"Could *she* know anything?" asked Ina.

"What about?"

"Well, about—you know—what we were talking of the other day: what Papa has known for sixty years . . . and Uncle Daan. . . ."

Aunt Stefanie made repeated deprecatory gestures with her hand:

"I don't know . . . whether Aunt Thérèse knows anything about it. But what I do know, Ina, is that I mean to keep *my* soul clear of any sins and improper things that may have happened in the past. It's difficult enough to guard one's soul in the present. No, dear, no, I won't hear any more about it."

She closed her beady bird's-eyes and shook her nodding bird's-head until her little old-lady's toque jigged all askew on her scanty hair; and she almost stumbled over the cat before she hoisted herself upstairs, jolting and stamping, to go to her mother.

Ina remained irresolute. She went into the kitchen. Anna said:

"Oh, is that you, ma'am? Are you staying a little longer?"

"Yes . . . Mrs. Ottilie may come presently. . . . I want to speak to her."

It was quite likely, thought Anna, that Mrs. Ottilie would come to-day. But, when there was a ring at the front-door, she looked out of the window and cried:

"No, it's Mr. Daan. . . ."

Daan Dercksz stuck his parroty profile through the door of the morning-room, nervously, and, on seeing Ina, said:

"I've brought bad news!"

"Bad news!" cried Ina, pricking up her ears again. "What is it, Uncle?"

"Dr. Roelofsz is dead."

"Oh, no!"

"Yes," said Uncle Daan to Ina, staring at him in dismay, and Anna, standing with the cat among her petticoats. "Dr. Roelofsz is dead. An apoplectic stroke. . . . They sent round to me first, because my *pension* was nearest. . . . It seems he took Takma's death very much to heart."

"It's dreadful," said Ina. "How is Grandmamma to be told? It will be such a blow to her. And she doesn't even know of Mr. Takma's death. . . ."

"Yes, it's very difficult. . . . I've sent word to your father and I expect him here any minute; then we can talk over what we are to do and say. Perhaps somebody else will come to-day. . . ."

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" sighed Anna.

She looked at the stove, which was burning rather low, and, reflecting that perhaps there would be a

good many using the morning-room that day, she shook the cinder-drawer: the fire began to glow behind the mica panes.

"Ah me!" cried Ina. "Grandmamma won't survive them long now. . . . Uncle, do you know that Aunt Thérèse is coming to the Hague? Aunt Stefanie has had a letter. . . . Oh, if only she arrives in time to see Grandmamma! . . . Oh, what a terrible winter! . . . And Papa is looking so depressed. . . . Uncle," she said—Anna had gone back to the kitchen, moaning and groaning and stumbling over the cat—"Uncle, tell me: *why* has Papa been so depressed . . . ever since you came back to Holland?"

"Since I came back to Holland, dear? . . ."

"Yes, Uncle. There's something that brought you back to Holland . . . something that's made Papa so terribly depressed."

"I don't know, dear, I don't know. . . ."

"Yes, you do. . . . I'm not asking out of curiosity, I'm asking for Papa's sake . . . to help him . . . to relieve him . . . if he's in trouble. . . . It may be business-matters . . ."

"No, dear, it's not business-matters. . . ."

"Well, then, what *is* it?"

"Why, dear, it's nothing, nothing at all."

"No, Uncle Daan, there's *something*."

"But then why not ask your father?"

"Papa refuses to speak about it."

"Then why should *I* speak about it?" cried Daan

Dercksz, put on his guard by Ina's slip of the tongue. "Why should *I* speak about it, Ina? There may be something . . . business-matters, as you say . . . but it'll be all right. Yes, really, Ina, don't alarm yourself: it's all right."

He took refuge in a feigned display of indignation, pretended to think her much too curious about those business-matters and scratched the back of his head.

Ina's eyes assumed their well-bred, weary expression:

"Uncle, other people's money-matters are *le moindre de mes soucis*. . . . I was only asking you for an explanation . . . because of my love for my father."

"You're a good daughter to your father, we all know that, all of us. . . . Ah, there he is: he's ringing!"

And, before Anna had time to go to the door, he had let Harold Dercksz in.

"Do you mean to say that Dr. Roelofsz is dead?" asked Harold.

He had received Daan's note after Ina had gone out to take Lily's children to their great-great-grandmother.

"Yes," said Daan, "he's dead."

Harold Dercksz sank into a chair, his face twisted with pain.

"Papa, are you ill?" cried Ina.

"No, dear, it's only a little more pain . . . than

usual. . . . It's nothing, nothing at all. . . . Is Dr. Roelofsz dead?"

He saw before his eyes that fatal night of pouring rain: saw himself, a little fellow of thirteen, saw that group of three carrying the body and heard his mother crying:

"Oh, my God, no, not in the river!"

The day after, Dr. Roelofsz had held an inquest on his father's body and certified death by drowning.

"Is Dr. Roelofsz dead?" he repeated. "Does Mamma know?"

"Not yet," said Daan Dercksz. "Harold, you had better tell her."

"I?" said Harold Dercksz, with a start. "I? I can't do it. . . . It would mean killing my mother. . . . And I *can't* kill my mother. . . ."

And he stared before him. . . .

He saw the Thing. . . .

It passed, spectral in trailing veils of mist, which gathered round its slowly, slowly moving form; the leaves rustled; and ghosts threatened to appear from behind the silent trees, to stop the Thing's progress. . . . For, once his mother was dead, the Thing would sink into the abyss. . . .

"I *can't* kill my mother!" Harold Dercksz repeated; and his martyred face became drawn with torturing pain.

He clasped his hands convulsively. . . .

"And yet some one will *have* to tell her," Ina

muttered to Anna, who stood beside her, mumbling, speaking to herself, utterly distraught.

But there was a ring at the bell. She went to the door. It was Anton: this was the day when he came to pay his mother his weekly visit.

"Is there any one with Mamma?"

"Aunt Stefanie," said Ina.

"What's happened?" he asked, seeing her consternation.

"Dr. Roelofsz is dead."

"Dead?"

Daan Dercksz told him, in a few words.

"We've all got to die," he muttered. "But it's a blow for Mamma."

"We were just discussing, Uncle, who had better tell her," said Ina. "Would *you* mind?"

"I'd rather not," said Anton Dercksz, sullenly.

No, they had better settle that among themselves: he was not the man to meddle in tiresome things that didn't concern him. What did it all matter to him! He called once a week, to see his mother: that was his filial duty. For the rest, he cared nothing for the whole pack of them! . . . As it was, Stefanie had been bothering him more than enough of late, trying to persuade him to leave his money to his godchild, the Van Welys' little Netta; and he had no mind to do anything of the sort: he would rather pitch his money into the gutter. With Harold and Daan, who did business in India together and were intimate for that reason, he had

never had much to do: they were just like strangers to him. Ina he couldn't stand, especially since D'Herbourg had helped him out of a mess, in the matter of that little laundry-girl. He didn't care a hang for the whole crew. What he liked best was to sit at home smoking his pipe and reading and picturing to himself, in fantasies of sexual imagination, pleasant, exciting events which had happened in this or that remote past. . . . But this was something that no one knew about. Those were his secret gardens, in which he sat all alone, wreathed in the smoke that filled his room, enjoying and revelling in indescribable private luxuries. Since he had become so very old that he allowed himself to be tempted into futile imprudent acts, as with the laundry-girl, he preferred to keep quiet, in his clouds of smoke, and to evoke the lascivious gardens which he never disclosed and where no one was likely to look for him. And so he chuckled with secret contentment, brooding ever more and more in his thoughts as he grew older and older; but he merely said, repeating his words:

"No, I'd rather not. . . . It's very sad. . . . Is no one upstairs except Stefanie? Then I may as well go up too, Anna. . . ."

He moved towards the stairs. . . .

Could Uncle Anton know anything, Ina wondered, with fierce curiosity. He was so sullen always, so reserved; no doubt he kept what he knew to himself. Should she go and ask him? And, while

her father, sitting on his chair in pain, was still discussing with Uncle Daan which of them had better tell the old lady that Dr. Roelofsz was dead, Ina hurried after her uncle in the passage—Anna had gone back to the kitchen—and whispered:

"Tell me, Uncle. What was it that happened?"

"Happened? When?" asked Anton.

"Sixty years ago. . . . . You were a boy of fifteen then. . . . Something happened then that . . ."

He looked at her in amazement:

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"Something happened," she repeated. "You *must* remember. Something that Papa and Uncle Daan know, something that Papa has always known, something that brought Uncle Daan to Holland. . . ."

"Sixty years ago?" said Anton Dercksz.

He looked her in the eyes. The suddenness of her question had given such a shock to his self-centred, brooding brain that he suddenly saw the past of sixty years ago and clearly remembered that he had always thought that there must be something between his mother and Takma, something that they kept concealed between themselves. He had always felt this when, full of awe, almost hesitatingly, he approached his mother, once a week, and found old Takma sitting opposite her, starting nervously with that muscular jerk of his neck and

seeming to listen for something. . . . Sixty years ago? . . . Something must, something must have happened. And, in his momentary clearness of vision, he almost saw the Thing, divined its presence, unveiled his father's death, sixty years ago, was wafted almost unconsciously towards the truth, with the sensitive perspicacity—lasting but a second—of an old man who, however much depraved, had in his very depravity sharpened his cerebral powers and often read the past correctly.

"Sixty years ago?" he repeated, looking at Ina with his bleared eyes. "And what sort of thing could it be?"

"Can't you remember?"

She was all agog with curiosity; her eyes flashed into his. He hardly knew her, with all her well-bred weariness of expression gone; and he couldn't endure her at any time and he hated D'Herbourg and he said:

"Can't I remember? Well, yes, if I think hard, I may remember something. . . . You're right: I was a lad of fifteen then. . . .

"Do you remember"—Ina turned and looked down the passage, looked at the open door of the morning-room, saw her father's back huddled into a despondent curve—"do you remember . . . Grandmamma's *baboe?*"

"Yes, certainly," said Anton Dercksz, "I remember her."

"Ma-Boeten?"

"I daresay that was her name."

"Did she know anything?"

"Did she know anything? Very likely, very likely. . . . Yes, I expect she knew. . . ."

"What *was* it, Uncle? Papa is so depressed: I'm not asking out of curiosity. . . ."

He grinned. He did not know; he had only guessed something, for the space of a second, and had always suspected something between his mother and Takma, something that they hid together, while they waited and waited. But he grinned with pleasure because Ina wanted to know and because she was not going to know, at least not through him, however much she might imagine that he knew. He grinned and said:

"My dear, there are things which it is better not to know. It doesn't do to know everything that happened . . . sixty years ago. . . ."

And he left her, went slowly up the stairs, reflecting that Harold and Daan knew what the hidden Something was, the Something which Mamma and Takma had kept hidden between themselves for years and years. . . . The doctor had also known it, probably. . . . The doctor was dead, Takma was dead, but Mamma did not know that yet . . . and Mamma now had the hidden Thing to herself. . . . But Harold knew where it lay and Daan also knew where it lay . . . and Ina was looking for it. . . .

He grinned on the landing upstairs before he

went in to his mother; he could hear Stefanie's grating voice inside.

"*I*," he said to himself, "don't care a hang for the whole crew. As long as they leave *me* alone, with my pipe and my books, I don't care a hang for the whole pack of them . . . even though I do come and see my mother once a week. . . . And what she is keeping to herself and what she did with Takma, sixty years ago, I don't care a curse about either; that's her business, *their* business maybe . . . but *my* business it is *not*."

He entered and, when he saw his mother, preternaturally old and frail in the red dusk of the curtains, he hesitated and went up to her, full of awe. . . .

CHAPTER XXVI

THERE was another ring; and Anna, profoundly moved by the death of Dr. Roelofsz and moaning, "Oh dear, oh dear!" opened the door to Ottilie Steyn de Weert and Adèle Takma. Ina came out to them in the passage. They did not know of the doctor's death; and, when they heard and saw Daan and Harold in the morning-room, there was a general outcry—subdued, because of Mamma upstairs—and cross-questioning, a melancholy dismay and confusion, a consulting one with another what had best be done: whether to tell Mamma or keep it from her. . . .

"We can't keep it from her for ever," said Ottilie Steyn. "Mamma doesn't even know about Mr. Takma . . . and now there's this on top of it! Oh, it's terrible, terrible! Adèle, are you going up?"

"No," said Adèle Takma, shrinking, in this house, now that she knew. "No, Ottilie, I must go home, Mamma will have plenty of visitors without me."

She shrank from seeing the old lady, now that she knew; and, though she had walked to the house and walked in with Ottilie Steyn, she would not go upstairs.

"Ottilie," said Daan Dercksz to his sister, "*you* had better tell her . . . about Dr. Roelofsz."

"I?" said Ottilie Steyn, with a start.

But, at that moment, some one appeared in the street outside and looked in through the window.

"There's Steyn," said Harold, dejectedly.

Steyn rang and was shown in. No one had ever seen him in so great a rage. He vouchsafed no greetings and marched straight up to his wife:

"I thought I should find you here," he growled at her, in his deep voice. "I've seen your son, who came over from London with you."

Ottilie drew herself up:

"Well?"

"Why need the arrival of that young gentleman be kept as a surprise for me to come across in the street?"

"Why should I tell you that Hugh came with me?"

"And what has he come for?"

"What has that to do with you? 'Ask him, if you want to know."

"When he makes his appearance, it's for money."

"Very well, then it's for money. Not your money, at any rate! . . ."

They looked each other in the eyes, but Steyn did not want to go on discussing money, because Ottilie had inherited a part of Mr. Takma's. Hugh Trevelley scented money, whenever there was any about; and it was not that Steyn looked upon his

wife's money as his own, but, as old Takma's executor, he thought it a shame that his wife's son should be after it so soon. . . . He ceased speaking and his eyes alone betrayed his hatred; but Harold took his hand and said:

"Frans, Dr. Roelofsz is dead."

"*Dead?*" echoed Steyn, aghast.

Ina stared and pricked up her ears again. The afternoon had indeed been full of news. Even though she did not know about That, she was hearing other things: she had heard of the doctor's sudden death, heard that Aunt Thérèse was coming from Paris, heard that Hugh Trevelley was at the Hague. And now she had very nearly heard about the old gentleman's money. He must have left Aunt Ottilie something, but how much? Was it a big legacy? . . . Yes, the afternoon had really been crammed with news; and her eyes forgot to look weary and glistened like the glowing eyes of a basilisk. . . .

But the brothers were consulting Steyn: what did he think? Tell Mamma of Dr. Roelofsz' death, or keep it from her? . . . They reflected in silence. Out of doors, it suddenly began to pour with rain, a numbing rain; the wind blew, the clouds lowered. Indoors, the red light of the stove, burning with a sound of gentle crackling behind the mica panes, gleamed through the falling dusk. Meanwhile the Thing passed . . . and stared at Harold, stared into his eyes, which were almost closed with

pain. The Thing! Harold had known it since his early boyhood; Daan had known it for a few months and had come home from India, to his brother, because of it; upstairs, because of the old woman, who knew it, Stefanie and Anton both guessed it, but both refused to know it, lest they should be disturbed in the pursuit of their own lives; but downstairs Adèle and Steyn also knew it, because of the letter torn into two, four, eight pieces, the letter which the old man had been unable to destroy. In Paris, Thérèse, who was coming to Holland, knew it; in India, the *mantri* knew it. . . . But no one spoke of the Thing . . . which was passing; and Harold and Daan did not know that Adèle and Steyn knew; and none of them knew that Thérèse in Paris knew; and Steyn and Adèle did not know that the *mantri* in India knew, that Daan knew and that Harold had known so long. . . . But Ina knew about the *mantri* and knew that there was something, though she knew nothing about Adèle and Steyn and never for a moment suspected that they knew. . . . No one spoke of the Thing and yet the shadow of the Thing was all around them, trailing its veil of mist. . . . But the one who knew nothing at all and guessed nothing was Ottilie Steyn, wholly and sorrowfully absorbed in the melancholy of her own passing life: a life of adulation and fond admiration and passion, the tribute of men. She had been the beautiful Lietje; now she was an old woman and hated her three husbands, but

she hated Steyn most! And, perhaps because she was so much outside the Thing's sphere, Harold gently took her hand and, obeying an unconscious impulse, said:

"Yes, Ottilie, you . . . *you* must tell Mamma that Dr. Roelofsz is dead. It will be a great blow to her, but we cannot, we must not keep it from her. . . . As for Takma's death, ah, Mamma will soon understand that, without any telling! . . ."

His soft voice calmed the dismay and confusion; and Ottilie said:

"If you think, Harold, that I can tell her, I will go upstairs and try . . . I'll try and tell her. . . . But, if I can't do it, in the course of conversation, then I won't . . . then I simply will not tell her. . . ."

She went upstairs, innocent as a child: she did not *know*. She did not know that her mother, more than sixty years ago, had taken part in a murder, which that old deaf doctor had helped her to hush up. She knew that Takma was her father, but not that *he*, together with her mother, had murdered the father of her brothers, the father of her sister Thérèse. She went upstairs; and, when she entered the drawing-room, Stefanie and Anton rose to go, so that Mamma might not have too many visitors at a time.

For that matter, it did not tire the old woman to chat—or to sit with a visitor in cosy silence for a little while—so long as the "children" did not all

come at once. She was still slightly elated with the young life which she had seen, with Lily van Wely's babies. She had talked about them to Stefanie and Anton, not knowing that the babies were their godchildren: no one had told her that; and she really thought that little Netta's name was Ottilitje and spoke of little Lietje: they knew whom she meant.

Ottilie Steyn was left alone with her mother. She did not speak much, but sat beside her mother, who had taken her hand. . . . . Ah, she herself felt touched! There, in that empty chair, at which the old woman kept staring, old Mr. Takma would never sit again. . . . Her father! She had loved him as a daughter loves her father! She was inheriting a hundred thousand guilders from him; but never again would he put a hundred-guilder note in her hand, in that kind way of his.

It was as though the old woman guessed some of her daughter's thoughts, for she said, with a movement of her hand towards the chair:

"Old Mr. Takma is ill."

"Yes," said Ottilie Steyn.

The old woman shook her head mournfully:

"I don't expect I shall see him again this winter."

"He will get well again. . . ."

"But even so he will not be allowed out. . . . ."

"No," said Ottilie, feebly. "Perhaps not, Mamma. . . ."

She was holding the brittle, slender, wand-like old fingers in hers. . . . Downstairs, she knew, the

brothers were waiting; Stefanie probably also; Ina too. . . . Adèle Takma had gone.

"Mamma," she said, all of a sudden, "do you know that somebody else is ill?"

"No, who?"

"Dr. Roelofsz."

"Roelofsz? Yes, I haven't seen him . . . I haven't seen him for the last two days."

"Mamma," said Ottilie Steyn, turning her sorrowful little face—it was still a pretty face, with blue, child-like eyes—to her mother, "it's very sad, but . . ."

No, she simply could not say it. She tried to withdraw her sentence, not to complete it; but the old woman had at once seized the meaning of those few words:

"He's dead?" she asked, quickly.

Her voice cut through Ottilie Steyn. She had not the strength to utter a denial: with a heart-rending smile on her face she nodded yes.

"A-ah!" sighed the old woman, overwhelmed.

And she stared at Takma's chair. Her old, dried-up eyes did not weep; they merely stared, intensely. She remained sitting straight up in her chair. The past heaved up before her eyes; there was a great buzzing all around her. But she remained sitting upright and staring before her.

"When did he die?" she asked, at last.

Ottilie Steyn told her, in a very few words. She was crying, not her mother. The old, old woman

saw herself as she was, more than sixty years ago. It was then that she had given herself to Roelofsz, so that he should not speak. . . . He had not spoken. . . . He had remained her friend, loyally, for all those long, long years, had shared the hideous burden of the past with her and Takma. . . . No, he had never spoken . . . and they had grown so very old, without . . . without anybody knowing. . . . Nobody knew it, not one of her children. . . . People had talked sometimes, in the old days, had whispered terrible things: that was past. . . . Everything passed, everything passed. . . . Nobody knew, except Takma himself, now that poor Roelofsz was dead. He had exacted a high price . . . but he had always remained loyal. . . .

Ottilie Steyn was crying, said nothing more, held her mother's hand. . . . It had grown very dark: the companion came in, to light the lamp. . . . The wind howled dismally; the rain dashed against the window-panes; a clammy dampness gave Ottilie an unpleasant sensation, as of something chilly passing over her in that room with its scanty fire, because the old woman could no longer bear a great heat. The hanging lamp above the table in the middle of the room cast down a circle of light; the rest of the room remained in shadow: the walls, the chair, the empty chair opposite. The companion had gone, when the old woman asked, suddenly:

"And . . . and Mr. Takma, Ottilie?"

"Yes, Mamma? . . ."

"Is . . . is he ill, also? . . ."

The daughter was startled by the expression on her mother's face; the dark eyes stared wide. . . .

"Mamma, Mamma, what's the matter?"

"Is he ill . . . or is he . . . also . . ."

"Ill? Yes, he's ill too, Mamma. . . ."

She did not finish. . . .

Her mother was staring in front of her, staring at the empty chair opposite, in the shadow against the wall. Ottilie grew frightened; for her mother, stiffly and laboriously, now lifted a trembling arm from her lap and pointed with a slender, wand-like finger. . . .

"Mamma, Mamma, what *is* it? . . ."

The old woman stared and pointed, stared and pointed at the empty chair.

"There . . . *the-there!*" she stammered. "*There!*"

And she continued to stare and point. She said nothing, but she saw. She did not speak, but she saw. Slowly she stood up, still staring, still pointing, and shrank back, slowly, very slowly. . . . Ottilie rang the bell, twice; the companion rushed into the room at once; from below came sounds of confusion, faint exclamations, Anna's "Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" and whispering voices. Ina, Daan and Stefanie came upstairs. But they did not enter the room; the companion made a sign that it was not necessary. . . .

The old woman's stiff arm fell slowly to her side, as she stood. . . . But she was still staring and shrinking back, slowly. . . .

She no longer seemed to see Ottilie in her horror at what she did see. And all that she said, with unseeing eyes, though the rest of her consciousness remained, was:

"To bed! . . . To bed! . . ."

She said it as though she were very, very tired. They put her to bed, Anna and the companion. She remained silent, with her thin lips pressed together and her eyes still staring. Her heart had seen and . . . she knew. She knew that he, Takma, Emile —the man whom she had loved above everything, above everybody, in the dead, dead years—that he was dead, that he was dead. . . .

CHAPTER XXVII

"COME," said Lot, gently, one morning, sitting with Elly in the sitting-room where he came so often to chat and have tea with her in the old days before they were married, "come, let us talk sensibly. It put both of us out to be dragged back from Italy, from our work, while—very foolishly—we never thought that this might easily happen one day. Dear old Grandpapa was so very old! We thought that he would live for ever! . . . But now that we are here, Elly, and Steyn has told us that all the affairs are settled, we may as well come to a sensible decision. You don't want to stay in this house; and it is, no doubt, too big, too gloomy, too old. . . . To live with Mamma . . . well, I did hint at it the other day, but Mamma talked of it so vaguely, as though she really didn't much care about it. . . . Now that Hugh is with her she's quite 'off' me: it's Hugh here and Hugh there. It was always like that: it was like that in 'Mr.' Trevelley's time, when I was a boy and Hugh a child. John and Mary didn't count for much either; and it's just the same now. . . . So we won't talk of setting up house together. . . . But what shall we do, Elly? Look out for a smaller house and settle down? Or go

abroad again, go back to Italy? . . . You enjoyed it, after all, and we were working together so pleasantly. . . . We were very happy there, weren't we, Elly?"

His voice sounded gentle, as it always did, but there was a note almost of entreaty in it now. His nature, his fair-haired person—was he not turning a little grey at the temples?—lacked physical vitality and concealed no passionate soul; but there was a great gentleness in him: under that touch of laughing bitterness and vanity and superficial cynicism he was kind and indulgent to others, with no violent longings for himself. Under his feminine soul lay the philosophy of an artist who contemplates everything around and within himself without bursting into vehemence and violence about anything whatever. He had asked Elly to be his wife, perhaps upon her own unspoken suggestion that she needed him in her work and in her life; and, often in jest and once in a way in earnest, he had asked himself why he was getting married, why he had got married and whether liberty and independence did not suit him better. But, since he had seen his sister's happiness with Aldo at Nice and had also felt his own, softer-tinted happiness, very fervent and very true in his wistfully-smiling, neutral-tinted soul, which withdrew itself almost in panic under his fear of old age; since he had been able to seize the moment, carefully, as he would have seized a precious butterfly: since then it had all remained

like that, since then his still, soft happiness had remained with him as something very serious and very true, since then he had come to love Elly as he never thought that he could love any one. And it had been a joy to him to roam about Italy with Elly, to watch her delight in that beautiful past which lay so artistically dead and, on returning to Florence, to plunge at her instance into earnest studies of the Medici period. How they had rooted and ransacked together, taking notes as they worked; how he had written in the evenings, feeling so utterly, so fondly happy in their sitting-room at the *pension* where they stayed! Two lamps, one beside Elly, one beside himself, shed a light over their papers and books; vases of fragrant flowers surrounded them; photographs pinned to the walls shadowed back the beauties of the museums in the gathering dusk. But, amid the beauties of that land and of that art, amid his happiness, amid the sunshine, an indolence had stolen over him; he often proposed a trip into the country, a drive, a walk to Fiesole, to Ema; he loved looking at the life of the people in the street, smiling at it with gladness: the Archives were cold and dusty; and he simply could not keep on working so regularly. And in the evening he would gaze across the Arno and sit blissfully smoking his cigarette at the window, until Elly also shut up her books and the Medicis drifted away in the changing lights of early evening outside and grew indistinct. . . .

He had at first not noticed her disappointment. When he did, he was unwilling to pain her and he went back to his research. But he did it against the grain. That regular work did not suit him. It tired his brain; behind his forehead he plainly felt a reluctancy, a barrier that prevented something from entering . . . just as he had felt when, at school, he had to do a sum and failed, twice and thrice over. . . . In addition, he was burning to write ephemeral essays: he had a superabundance of material, about the Medicis, about Benozzo Gozzoli's frescoes at the Palazzo Riccardi, for instance. . . . Oh, to write an essay like that from afar, all aglow, with azure jewels and gold! But he dared not write the article, because Elly had once said:

"Don't go cutting up into articles all that we have discovered."

As for Elly, she devoted herself earnestly and with masculine perseverance to her research and felt almost an inner inclination herself to write their book, a fine, serious historical study; but she understood that her art alone would not suffice for it. Whereas she thought that Lot had only to wish it and that they would then turn out something very good between them. . . . But Lot felt that indolence impairing his powers more and more, felt his reluctance, like an impeding, resisting barrier, drawn right across his forehead; and one morning he said, a little nervously, that it was im-

possible for him, that it was too difficult for him, that he couldn't do it. She had not insisted; but a great disappointment had come over her and yet she had remained gentle and kind and had answered lightly and not betrayed the depth of her disappointment. . . . The books now remained closed, the notes under the paper-weights; and there was no more question of the Medicis. It produced a void about them, but Lot nevertheless felt happy and remained true to that soft blissfulness which had come to him smilingly and which cast a soft gloss over both his worldly cynicism and the overhanging dread. But Elly's disappointment increased and became a great sorrow to her, greater even, she thought, than the sorrow which she had felt as a young girl at her broken engagement, at the loss of the man whom she had first loved. She was a woman to suffer more for another than for herself; and she suffered because she could not rouse Lot to great things. Her love for Lot, after her emotional passion for another, was very intellectual, more that of a cultured woman than of a woman all heart and senses. She did not see this so plainly herself; but her disappointment was very great that she could not lead Lot on to do great work; and the void around her widened, whereas he, in the beauty of the land that was dear to him, in his gentle happiness, just felt the void around himself shrinking into a perspective in which his eyes wandered dreamily. . . . Not a bitter word was spoken

between them; but, when they sat together, Elly felt herself grow very aimless. She was not of a contemplative mind. That wandering through Italian cities, that pleasant rambling among the beauties of the museums did not satisfy her, to whom action was a real and positive need. Her fingers had a nervous tremor of aimlessness between the pages of her Baedeker. She could not be always admiring and musing and existing in that way. She must act. She must devote herself. And she longed for a child. . . . And yet a child, or perhaps several children, while not bringing unhappiness, would not bring happiness either; for she knew that, even if she had children, she would not find sufficient satisfaction for her activity in educating them and bringing them up: she would do it as a loving duty, but it would not fill her life. She felt that almost masculine call within her, to strive as far as she could. If her limit was reached, well, then she would go no farther. But to strive to that limit, to perform her task as far as her nature demanded! . . . And she spoke to Lot in this sense. He did not know how to answer her, did not understand her and felt that something was escaping him. It never came to bitter words, but on both sides there were little thrills and counterthrills, after the first harmonious soft billowing over them both. . . .

This sudden journey home, though causing an abrupt distraction, had, because of its relative futility, intensified Elly's feeling that she was out of

tune with things. She had loved the old man, as a father more than a grandfather, but she was too late to see him on his deathbed and the business-matters could have been arranged by power of attorney.

"Yes, but we're here now," said Lot, "and we must have a talk like sensible people. . . . Shall we go back to Italy, Elly?"

"No, Lot, I'm glad I saw the place, with you; why go back at once and try to repeat . . . ?"

"Settle down here at the Hague? Go and live in the country, when the winter is over?"

She looked at him because she heard the note of entreaty in his voice: he was entreating her because he felt something escape him . . . and she suddenly felt pity for him. She flung herself on his breast, threw her arms round him:

"My dear, darling boy!" she said. "I am so absolutely devoted to you."

"And I to you, Elly dearest. . . . I love you more than I thought I could love anybody. Oh, Elly, let us keep this feeling! Don't let us be irritable. . . . You see, there has never been an unkind word between us, but still I feel something in you, a dissatisfaction. . . . Is it because . . ."

"Because what, Lot?"

"Because I can't do . . . as much as you would like me to? . . . We were working together so pleasantly; and the work we did is not wasted . . . that sort of work is never wasted. . . . But, you

know, darling, to do it as you would have me do it . . . is beyond me: I am not so thorough as that. I am a writer for the magazines, a dilettante, not an historian. Mine is an ephemeral talent and all that I create is ephemeral: it always was. . . . Take it like that. . . ."

"Yes, Lot, I do take it like that. I am no longer distressed . . . about our poor Medicis."

"You'll see, I shall make a series of articles out of our researches: really, something quite good. A series: they'll follow on one another. . . ."

"Yes, do it that way."

"But then you must interest yourself in it."

"That I certainly shall."

"And now let us talk about what we shall do, where we shall live."

"We'd better not settle down. . . . Stay here, until the house is sold, and then . . ."

"Very well, then we can see."

"Yes."

"We haven't seen Grandmamma yet. Shall we go this afternoon?"

"I don't believe that she has been up since, but we can go and ask."

She gave him an affectionate kiss. It was as an atonement after what had clashed and thrilled through them, without bitter words. She tried to recollect herself, to force herself, in the empty hunger of her soul. She loved Lot with all her heart; she would devote herself to him . . . and

perhaps later to his children. . . . That must be enough to fill a woman's life. . . . She would have her hobbies: she would take up her modelling again; after all, the *Beggar Boy* was very good. . . . That would certainly give completeness to her life, so long as she was happy with her husband; and that she was sure she was. She began to talk in a livelier strain than at first: something seemed to recover itself in her dejection. She would lead an ordinary life, as a happy wife, a happy mother, and cease longing for great, faraway things. . . . She would give up striving for horizons difficult of approach, horizons that proved to be limits, so that she had to go back after all.

She was gay at luncheon and Aunt Adèle brightened: the poor thing had been depressed lately and walked with a stoop, as though bending under a heavy load; she was sad also because she thought that Lot and Elly were not quite happy. Aunt Adèle now freshened up, glad because Elly was more cheerful and looked brighter and was once more talking with her restless volubility.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THAT afternoon, Lot and Elly went to Grandmamma's.

Since the evening when Mamma Ottilie had told her of Dr. Roelofsz' death, the old woman had not left her bed. Dr. Thielens called every day, declaring that she was really remarkably well: she was not suffering from any complaint whatever; she was perhaps suffering from old age; her brain was perfectly clear; and he was amazed at that splendid constitution, the constitution of a strong woman who had possessed a great deal of blood and a magnificent vitality.

When Anna opened the door in the Nassaulaan, just as Lot and Elly rang, they found her talking in the passage to Steyn.

"I've come to see how Mamma is," he was saying.

"Do come in, please!" said Anna. "There's a nice fire in the morning-room."

The old servant shooed the cat to the kitchen. She did not care for chatting in the passage, but thought it pleasant in the morning-room, when the relations were waiting there or came to ask for news; and she at once brought out her brandy-cherries:

"That's nice and comforting in this cold weather,

Mr. Lot and Mrs. Elly. . . . Yes, the old lady has been in bed ever since. . . . Ah, who can tell if it's not the beginning of the end! . . . Still, Dr. Thielens is pretty satisfied. . . . And, you know, Mrs. Thérèse is here too!" she added in a whisper.

"Oh?" said Lot. "When did she come?"

"Yesterday. . . . And the mistress saw her at once . . . and she's very nice, I must say . . . but, you see . . . she's on her knees all day by the mistress' bed, saying her prayers . . . and whether that'll do the mistress any good, who was never very religious . . . And then those Catholic prayers, they last so long, so long . . . I wonder Mrs. Thérèse doesn't get stiff knees from it: *I* couldn't stand it, that I'm sure of. . . . Yes, yes, Mrs. Thérèse is here: she sleeps at an hotel, but she's here all day praying . . . and I believe she would have liked to stay last night . . . but the companion said that, if the mistress got worse, she'd ask the people next door to telephone at once: they have a telephone; the mistress would never have one. . . . So Mrs. Thérèse went away, but she was here by seven o'clock this morning, before I myself was up! . . . Mr. Daan called yesterday, so did Mrs. Ina; they saw Mrs. Thérèse; I don't think she's calling on any of the family: she says she hasn't the time—likely enough, with all that praying—and she thought she could see the family down here, where I always keep up a good fire.

. . . Yes, I asked Dr. Thielens: 'Doctor,' I said, 'is it a good thing that Mrs. Thérèse keeps praying all day long by the mistress' bed?' But the doctor, who had seen the mistress, said, 'Well, it doesn't seem to excite her: on the contrary, she is very quiet and pleased to see Mrs. Thérèse again . . . for the last time perhaps!' . . . Ah, Mrs. Elly and Mr. Lot, it's a sad home-coming for you! . . . And who do you think I saw as well? Your brother, Mr. Lot . . ."

"Hugh . . . ?"

"Well, I just call him Mr. Hugo: I can't manage that English name. He came with Mrs. Ottilie; and it's a pleasure to look at them. . . . Not that I think any the less of you, Mr. Lot, far from it; but Mr. Hugo is a handsome fellow, so broad-shouldered and such a jolly face, with his clean-shaven upper-lip, and *such* nice eyes! . . . Yes, I can understand that Mrs. Ottilie dotes on him: she looked so pretty too, beside her son. . . . Yes, it's wonderful how young she looks, though she *is* sixty: you'd never think it, to look at her. . . . You mustn't mind my speaking so freely of your wife, Mr. Frans . . . nor about Mr. Hugo either, you mustn't be angry. I know you're not very fond of him; and he's a sly one, that I do believe; but he makes you like him and no mistake about it. . . . Well, you always got on with Mr. Lot, didn't you, Mr. Frans? . . . And now I'd better tell Mrs. Thérèse that you're here. . . ."

Old Anna tripped away and up the stairs and Steyn asked:

"Haven't you decided yet what you're going to do?"

"No," said Lot.

"We shall stay in the Mauritskade till the house is sold," said Elly.

"I'm glad I saw you to-day," said Steyn. "I'd have come to you otherwise: I wanted to speak to you, Lot. . . . Perhaps I can do so before any one comes. . . ."

"What is it, Steyn?"

"I wanted to tell you of a step I've determined to take. You won't like it, but it's inevitable. I've spoken to Mamma, as much as it's possible to speak to her. . . . I sha'n't go on living with her, Lot."

"Are you going to get divorced?" cried Lot.

"That I don't mind: if Mamma wants to, I'm agreeable. . . . Lot, you were talking the other day of the needless sacrifice which I was making in living with your mother. . . ."

"I meant . . ."

"Yes, I know, you meant that I could just go away, without a divorce. . . . I shall certainly do that. I can't go on sacrificing myself, because . . . well, there's no need for it now. Since you left to get married, the house is simply a hell. You brought a certain peace and quiet at times; you managed to ensure a little harmony at meals. But that's all

gone now. . . . For you to come and live with us . . . I shouldn't even wish it. It would mean a wretched life for Elly. Besides . . . Mamma has money enough now to go where she likes . . . and, now that she has money, Hugh remains with her. . . . I asked her to talk as little as she could about the legacy and I don't believe that she goes chattering about it either; but she has told Hugh everything. . . ."

"I know she has," said Lot. "I've seen Hugh; and he said, 'Mamma's had a good bit left her.'"

"Exactly . . . and he remains with her and she with him. Formerly I used to think, if I go leaving her, then I'm leaving her alone with you; and money was scarce on both sides: I could never bring myself to do it then; but now, Lot, I shall go my own way."

"But, Steyn, you can't abandon Mamma to Hugh's mercies!"

"Can't I?" cried Steyn, flaring up. "And what would you have me do? Look on? Look on while she squanders her money on that boy? What can I do to stop it? Nothing! I refuse to give the least impression that *I* want to be economical with her money. *Let* her throw it away on that boy! She's got a hundred thousand: it'll be finished in a year. What she'll do then, *I* don't know. But I consider that I have suffered enough for what was once my fault. *Now,* now that she has money *and* Hugh, my sacrifice becomes needless. . . . I'm

going away: that's certain. If Mamma wants a divorce, I don't care; but I'm going. I shall leave the Hague. I shall go abroad. Perhaps I sha'n't see you for a long time. I can't say. . . . Lot, my dear fellow, I've stood it all for twenty years; and my only comfort in my home was yourself. I have learnt to be fond of you. We are two quite different natures, but I thank you for what you have been to me: a friend, a dear friend. If your gentle nature had not smoothed over all that could be smoothed over at home, I should never have stood it for all these twenty years. Now I'm going away, but with pleasant memories. You were eighteen years old when I married your mother. You and I have never had a single harsh word; and the merit of it is due to you entirely. I'm a rough chap and I have become very bitter. All the kindness in my life has come from your side. When you got married . . . I really missed you more perhaps than Mamma did: don't be angry with me, Elly, for saying so. . . . There, perhaps we shall see each other again . . . somewhere or other. . . . Don't cry, Lot, there's a good fellow!"

He took Lot in his arms and kissed him as a father kisses his son. He held him in his embrace for a moment and then shook him firmly by the hand:

"Come, Lot, my dear fellow . . . be a man! . . ."

"Poor Mamma!" said Lot.

His eyes were full of tears; he was greatly moved.

"When are you going?" he asked Steyn.

"To-morrow."

"At what time?"

"Nine in the morning . . . for Paris."

"I'll come and see you off. . . ."

"So will I, Steyn," said Elly.

She kissed him.

He turned to go; but there was a ring and Anna came down the stairs:

"I didn't dare disturb Mrs. Thérèse," she said. "She's so wrapped up in her prayers that . . . Why, look, Mr. Lot: there's Mamma . . . and your English brother! . . ."

"Damn it!" said Steyn, between his teeth. "I *can't* see her again. . . ."

"Steyn!" said Elly, in a voice of entreaty.

She was sorry for Lot, who sat huddled in a chair and unable to restrain himself: he was crying, though he knew that it wasn't manly.

Anna had opened the door and Ottilie and Hugh came in. They met Steyn in the passage. He and she looked each other in the eyes. Hugh's hand went to his cap, as in salutation to a stranger. They passed one another without a word; and Steyn walked out of the door. That was his leave-taking of his wife: he never saw her again; and with him there passed the last remnant of all her life of love.

"I came to see how Mamma is," she said to Elly,

to Anna. "And Hugh would so much like to see his grandmother. But Mamma is still in bed, isn't she, Anna? . . ."

She entered the morning-room:

"Ah, Lot! . . . Why, what's the matter, my boy?"

"Nothing, Mummy, nothing. . . ."

"Why are you looking so sad? Have you been crying?"

"No, Mummy, no. . . . Nerves a bit unstrung, that's all. . . . Hullo, Hugh! That's a thing you don't suffer from, slack nerves, eh, old chap? No, I don't expect you ever cry like an old woman, as I do. . . ."

Lot mastered himself, but his eyes were full of sorrow; they looked at his mother and his brother. . . . His mother did not care about dress; and he was struck by the fact that she had had a short tailor-made skirt built for her in London and a little simple, black-cloth coat that was moulded to her still young and slender figure, while her hat displayed a more youthful curve than he was accustomed to see on her pretty, grey-blond curly hair. She was sixty years of age! But she was all smiles; her smooth, round face, scored by scarce a wrinkle, was bright and cheerful; and—oh, he knew his mother so well!—he could see that she was happy. That was how she looked when she was happy, with that blue innocence in her eyes. . . . She was an old woman, she was sixty; but, when she now

entered beside her English son, she was of no age, because of a happiness that owed nothing to real maternal feeling, a happiness due only to a little affection which her English son bestowed upon her in words of flattery and caresses. He said coaxing things to her, roughly; he fondled her, roughly; and she was happy, she brightened under a new happiness. Lot she did not miss: he no longer existed for her . . . at the moment. She was simply radiant because she had Hugh by her side. And Lot, as he saw the two of them, felt a pang pierce his soul. . . . Poor Mamma! He had always been fond of his mother and he thought her so nice and such fun; and, thanks to his natural gentleness and tact, they had always got on well together. He knew that she was fond of him too, even though he was out of her mind for the moment. She had always loved Hugh best, of her five children. She had always loved Trevelley best, of her three husbands. . . . Poor, poor Mamma, thought Lot. She had her bit of money now: what *was* a hundred thousand guilders, if it was not properly looked after? What was a hundred thousand . . . to Hugh? And, when that hundred thousand was finished—in . . . in a couple of years, perhaps—what would poor Mamma do then? For then his handsome English brother, with the bold eyes and the shaven upper-lip, would not stay with poor Mamma. . . . And what would her old age be like then? Poor, poor Mamma! . . .

"You're extraordinarily like Mamma, Lot," said Hugh.

Yes, he was like his mother: he too was short, had very nearly her eyes, had very nearly her pretty hair, had the moulding of her young face. . . . He had been vain sometimes of his appearance in his youth, when he knew that he was a good-looking, fair-haired little chap. But he was vain no longer; and, beside Hugh, he felt an old woman, a slack-nerved old woman. . . . To be so tall, so broad-shouldered, so bold-eyed, with such a smiling-selfish mouth, such a cold heart, such calm, steel muscles and especially nerves; to care for nothing but your own comfort and victorious progress; to be able to live quietly on your mother's money and, when that was finished, calmly and quietly to throw your mother overboard and go your own way: that was the real sign of a strong attitude towards life! That meant keeping the world and your emotions under your thumb! That meant having no fear of what was coming or of approaching old age! That meant knowing nothing of nervous dread and never blubbering like an old woman, a slack-nerved old woman!

"Yes, Hugh, I'm like Mamma."

"And Elly's . . . like *you*," said Hugh.

"And, in a very ugly edition, like Mamma: at least, so people say, Mummy," said Elly, softly.

And she kissed her mother-in-law: she too was

sad, thinking of the old man . . . and of Steyn . . . and of poor Lot. . . .

The bell suddenly rang upstairs, twice: that was for the companion.

"Is Aunt Thérèse upstairs?" asked Elly.

"I haven't seen her yet," said Ottilie. "But what can it be? . . ."

"Oh dear, oh dear!" cried Anna, coming from the kitchen and driving the cat away. "It must be the mistress again, behaving funnily: you know, she sees things. . . ."

But the companion came tearing down the stairs, with a pale face:

"I believe she's dying!" she exclaimed, "I'm going next door . . . to telephone for the doctor. . . ."

"Stay!" said Lot. "I'll go."

He took his hat and went out. Dismay hovered over the house. Mamma, Ottilie, Elly, the companion and Anna went upstairs.

"You wait here, Hugh," said Ottilie.

He nodded.

He remained alone in the morning-room, sat down, amused himself by flinging his cap to the ceiling and catching it each time it fell. . . . He thought that his mother fould not inherit much from Grandmother. . . . There would be beastly little; and even then it would be divided among many.

He lit a cigarette and, when Lot came back,

opened the door to him, which Anna afterwards thought very nice of Hugh.

Lot also went upstairs. In the bedroom—the folding-doors were open, for the sake of the air, making the bedroom of a piece with the drawing-room where the old woman usually sat—dismay hovered, but it was subdued. Only Mamma was unable to restrain her sobs. It was so unexpected, she considered. No, she would never have thought it. . . .

Beside the bed stood Aunt Thérèse. And it seemed to Lot, when he entered, as though he were seeing Grandmother herself, but younger. . . .

Aunt Thérèse's dark creole eyes gave Lot a melancholy greeting. Her hand made a gesture towards the bed, on which the old woman lay, quite conscious.

Death was coming gradually, without a struggle, like a light guttering out. Only the breath came a little faster, panted with a certain difficulty. . . .

She knew that her children were around her, but did not know which of them. They were children: so much she knew. And this one, she knew, was Thérèse, who had come; and she was grateful for that. Her hand moved over the coverlet; she moaned and said:

"Thérèse . . . Thérèse . . ."

"Yes, Mamma . . ."

"Thérèse . . . Thérèse . . . pray. . . ."

She herself folded her hands.

Thérèse van der Staff knelt down beside the bed. She prayed. She prayed at great length. The old woman, with folded hands, lay dying, very slowly, but calmly. . . . Mamma Ottilie was sobbing in Lot's arms. . . .

There was a ring at the door downstairs.

"That dear Mr. Hugo!" whispered old Anna. "He's opening the door!"

It was Dr. Thielens, but there was nothing for him to do. The old woman had hardly been ill: it was a light burning out. Since they had told her of Roelofsz' death, since she herself had seen Takma dead, she had not got up and had only still enjoyed, in gratitude, the one great happiness of seeing her daughter Thérèse appear so unexpectedly beside her bed. No one had spoken to her of Takma's death, but speaking was not necessary: she had seen and she knew. . . . She remembered quite well that Thérèse had become a Catholic and that she herself had sometimes longed for the peace of absolution and the consolation of prayer, which would be wafted by the saints to the throne of God and Mary. And she had asked Thérèse to pray, to pray for her old mother. . . . She, the mother, did not know that Thérèse knew: she had forgotten, entirely forgotten, the fever, many years ago, when she had been delirious in her daughter's arms. . . . And, now that she was dying, she reflected, gratefully, that God had been very good to her, notwithstanding her sinful soul, for no one, no one knew. No

one, no one had ever known. Her children had never known. . . . She had suffered punishment, within herself, the punishment of remorse, borne for long old years. She had suffered punishment in the terror which "his" spectre had given her, rising all bloody in the corner of the room, a few times during those years, in the corner by the china-cabinet. Yes, she had suffered punishment! . . . But still God had been merciful: no one, no one had known; no one, no one knew or would ever know. . . . Now she was dying, with her hands folded together; and Thérèse, who knew how to pray, prayed. . . .

Softly she sighed her breath away, the old woman; long, long she lay sighing away her breath. . . . The silence of the room was broken by Ottilie Steyn's sobs and by the sighing of the old woman's breath. . . . Out of doors, the thaw stole down the window-panes like a stream of tears.

"Oh!" Anna wept. "How long the old lady takes dying! . . . Hark . . . there's a ring! . . . That kind Mr. Hugo, the dear boy, he's a great help to me, Mrs. Ottilie: listen, he's opening the door again! . . ."

Hugh did in fact open the door; and in quick succession there entered Harold, Daan and Floor, Stefanie and Anton, Ina, D'Herbourg and the Van Welys. Lot had telephoned to them from the neighbours' to come, because Grandmamma was dying. Aunt Adèle also arrived. She came upstairs,

just for a minute, to take a last glance from behind the bed-curtain at the old woman, and then went down again. The last sighing breaths pursued her to the morning-room below. All that she had seen in that brief moment, was the peacefulness of the dying mother and, beside her bed, Thérèse, whom she had not seen for years, praying without looking up. Downstairs, Harold Dercksz had sunk into a chair: he was suffering unendurable pains, his face was twisted with torture and before his eyes he saw his own deathbed: it would not be long now, he had suffered too much lately; and it was only his strength of will that kept him going. Daan Dercksz stood in front of him and whispered in Harold's ear:

"Harold . . . Harold . . . it is a good thing that Mamma is dying . . . and she is dying peacefully . . . so it seems. . . ."

Yes, she was dying, dying peacefully. . . . Beside her bed Thérèse knelt and prayed, Thérèse who did not know, so Harold thought: nobody . . . nobody knew but himself and Daan. . . . The Thing . . . the Thing was passing. . . . Listen, upstairs his mother was sighing away her last few breaths; and at each breath the Thing passed, passed farther, trailing its misty veil: leaves rustled, the thaw poured on as in a stream of tears, spectres loomed behind the trees, but the Thing . . . the Thing was passing! . . .

Oh, for years, for sixty long years he had seen the Thing dragging past, so slowly, so lingeringly,

as if it would never pass, as if it would tarry for ever, too long for a human life yearning for the end! Sixty years long he had seen it thus, the Thing; sixty years long it had stared him in the eyes. . . . Listen, Mamma was moaning more loudly, more violently for a while; they could hear Ottilie sobbing more passionately. . . .

The companion came downstairs. There stood or sat the children, elderly people all.

"It is over," she said, softly.

They wept, the old people; they embraced one another; Aunt Floor screamed:

"Ah! . . . *Kassian!* . . . That poor-r-r, dhear-r-r Mamma!"

Over the whole house hovered the emotion of death which had come and was going. . . .

Harold Dercksz gazed before him. . . . His eyes of pain stared from his face, but he did not move in his chair.

The Thing: he saw the terrible Thing! It was turning at the last bend of its long, long, endless path. . . .

And it plunged headlong, into an abyss.

It was gone.

Only a mist, like the haze of its nebulous veil, drifted to and fro before Harold's eyes.

"O my God!" cried Ina. "Papa's fainting!"

She caught him in her arms. . . .

The dark evening fell.

One by one, the "children" went upstairs and

looked at their old mother. She lay in the peacefulness of death; the lined porcelain face made a vague blur in the shadow against the white of her pillow, but it was now smooth, untroubled, at rest. And her hands were folded together: she had died like that.

Thérèse knelt beside the bed. . . .

CHAPTER XXIX

THE room was warmed by a moderate fire; the curtains were half-closed; and Lot had slept calmly, for the first time since the fever had passed its crisis. It was his own old room, in Mamma's house; and, when he woke, his fingers, after a deliciously lazy interval, felt for the letter which Elly had written him from St. Petersburg. He drew the letter from the envelope and read and read it again, glad that she had written so fully and that she seemed charged with courage and enthusiasm. Then his hand dropped, feeling the cold, and hid itself under the blankets. He lay in quiet content, after his first calm sleep, and looked round the room, the room which Steyn had given up to him years ago, so that he might work at his ease, with his books and knick-knacks around him. It was the only comfortable room in the house. . . . Well, he would not have it long. Steyn was gone; and Mamma intended to pay the final quarter's rent, sell the furniture and go back to England with Hugh. . . .

Lot felt a little light-headed, but easy and with no fever, really a great deal better than he could remember having been for a long time past. He enjoyed the warmth of the bed, while outside—he had just noticed it—the rain came pattering down;

but he, lying quietly in bed, did not mind the rain. On the table beside him was some water, a bottle of quinine capsules, a plate of hot-house grapes and his bell. He picked a couple of grapes, sucked them and rang.

Ottilie entered, anxiously:

"Are you awake, Lot?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"Have you had a sleep?"

"Yes, I'm feeling rather well."

"Oh, Lot, you were so bad yesterday and the day before! . . . You were delirious and kept calling out . . . for your father . . . and for Elly. . . . I didn't know what to do, my boy, and at last . . ."

"Well?"

"Nothing. Your cough's bad still, Lot. . . ."

"Yes, I caught cold; we know that; it'll get better . . . as soon as I'm out of this confounded country, as soon as I'm in Italy."

"I shouldn't go thinking of Italy just yet."

"As soon as I'm better, I'll first go and take the sun at Nice, with Ottilie and Aldo, and then on to Rome."

"What do you want to do there, all by yourself?"

"I have old friends there, fellows I know. And I shall do some writing. . . . Is Hugh at home?"

"Yes, he's in his little room."

"Has he got Steyn's room?"

"Well, of course! What other room would you have me give him? Now that Steyn has gone . . . abroad, surely I can have my own son with me!"

"I should like to talk to Hugh. Would you ask him to come to me?"

"Won't it tire you, Lot?"

"No, Mummy. I've had a good sleep."

"Do you want to talk to Hugh alone?"

"Yes, please."

"What about?"

"About you."

"And mayn't I be there?"

"No. You mustn't listen outside the door either. Do you promise?"

"What do you want to talk to Hugh about?"

"I've told you: about you. There, ask him to come to me. And then leave us alone for a bit."

"Are you sure there's no fever?"

She felt his forehead.

"Take my temperature, if you like. . . ."

"It's just over ninety-eight," she said, in a minute or two.

"I told you so. I'm feeling very well."

"Do you like your grapes?"

"Yes. . . ."

She went at last, still hesitating. . . . She had meant to tell him that, two days ago, he had been so ill and had called out so eagerly for his father and Elly that she had sent Hugh to telegraph to Pauws; that Pauws had come from Brussels; that Pauws had

seen him the night before last. Lot had not recognized his father. . . . But she found all this rather difficult to tell and she went away. . . .

In a few moments Hugh came in, sturdy as usual, with his calves showing under the breeches of his check bicycling-suit, and asked:

"Feeling better, Lot?"

"Yes, a great deal better. I wanted to have a talk with you, Hugh. Will it bore you?"

"Not at all, Lot."

"We've always got on all right, haven't we, you and I?"

"Of course we have."

"It may have been because I was never much in your way; but in any case . . ."

"You were always a good chap."

"Thank you."

"Doesn't it tire you, talking?"

"No, old fellow; in fact, I want to talk to you. . . . Hugh, there's something I want to ask you."

"What's that, Lot?"

"Mamma is going to London with you."

"Yes, she thought she'd like to come with me this time. You see, John and I never see her; and Mary will soon be home from India."

"Yes, I can understand . . . that she sometimes wants to see her other children too. Hugh, all I wanted to ask you is: be kind to her."

"But aren't I?"

"Well, then, remain so. She's a big child, Hugh. She wants a lot of affection, wants it coming her way. You see, I've been with her most: thirty-eight years, with a few intervals. You've lived away from her for over ten years; and even before that you were more with your father than with her. So you don't know Mamma very well."

"Oh, I know her well enough!"

"Perhaps," said Lot, wearily. "Perhaps you know her well enough. . . . But try to be *nice* to her, Hugh."

"Of course I will, Lot."

"That's a good chap."

His voice fell, despondently; but his hand grasped his half-brother's hand. Oh, what was the use of insisting? What did that strong, cool lad, with his bold eyes and his laughing, clean-shaven mouth, feel, except that Mamma had money—a hundred thousand guilders—and was going with him to his country? In Hugh's firm hand Lot felt his own fingers as though they were nothing. So thin, so thin: had he wasted away so much in a week?

"Hugh, I wish you'd just give me that hand-glass."

Hugh gave him the mirror.

"Draw the blind a little higher."

Hugh did so; and Lot looked at himself. Yes, he had grown thin, but he also looked very bad because he was unshaved.

"Hugh, if you're going out again, you might

look in at Figaro's and tell him to come and shave me."

"Right you are."

Lot put down the looking-glass.

"Have you heard from Elly, Lot?"

"Yes, Hugh."

"That's a fine thing she's doing."

"Yes."

"One'd think she was an Englishwoman!" said Hugh, almost in admiration.

"Yes," said Lot, gently, "just so, an Englishwoman. . . ."

But an unaccustomed voice sounded from below; and Lot, listening, was greatly surprised, because he seemed to recognize the voice of his father, of Pauws, speaking to the servant.

He sat up in bed:

"Hugh!" he cried. "Hugh! Can it be . . . *is* that my father?"

"I believe so," drawled Hugh, laconically.

"Is that Papa? How does he come to be here, *in this house?*"

"Ah," said Hugh, "you're no end of a swell to-day! But two days ago you were delirious, calling out for your governor. So Mother said, 'Wire.' I wired. He stood by your bedside for a moment, but you didn't know him. . . ."

"Have I been as ill as all that?" cried Lot.

He felt things growing misty and unsteady, but

yet he distinguished Pauws cautiously entering the room:

"My boy! . . ."

"Father! . . ."

Pauws stepped briskly to the bed, took Lot's hand; then he remained quite still for at least an hour. Hugh had gone. For at least an hour Pauws sat without speaking. It seemed that Lot had fallen asleep. He woke after that long silence and said:

"Mamma telegraphed to you . . ."

"Two days ago. I came at once. You didn't know me. . . ."

"Did you . . . speak to Mamma?"

"No."

"Have you seen her?"

"No. The servant told me the day before yesterday, when I went away, that they would let me know at the hotel if there was any change in you. Yesterday, when I called, you were asleep. . . . But where's Elly?"

"Don't you know? . . ."

"How should I know?"

Lot had closed his eyes again and old Mr. Pauws sat silent, asking no more questions, with Lot's hand in his. Once more there was a long, throbbing silence. Old Pauws looked round the room, casting his quick glance here and there, breathing again because Lot was not going to die. . . . He had never been inside the house before. He had not seen Ottilie for years and years. Nor had she shown

herself this time. Nevertheless he had heard her voice, hushed immediately, behind a door; and the sound of that voice, that voice of the old days, had moved him violently. . . . She had grown old, no doubt; but that voice behind the door was the same voice, the voice of Ottilie, his wife! Oh, what a sweet, pretty creature she was when he married her, a girl just turned twenty, and how happy they had been, in spite of an occasional angry word, in Java, with their two children: little Ottilie first and then Lot! . . . Only a few years; and then . . . and then she had met that bounder Trevelley, the father of the boy whom he had just seen, with his damned English mug, a mug that was like his father's. And since then . . . he had never seen her again! How long was that ago? He reckoned it out: it was thirty-four years! His little Ottilie was a girl of six then, Lot a little chap of four: two such loves of children, such dear, pretty children! . . . At the divorce, the custody of the children was awarded to him, not her; but Lot was so fond of his mother and he had consented, after some years, that they should stay on with their mother: she remained their mother, in spite of what she had done. . . . Little Ottilie had spent a very long time with him sometimes; Lot, on the other hand, would be longer with his mother: it was a constant going to and fro for the poor mites, who had no fixed home in which to live with their parents. Still, he had always gone on seeing his children and

keeping in touch with them; and he admired little Ottilie, because she grew into big Ottilie and became very handsome; but he had always doted on Lot, though he was such a frail little fair-haired chap —perhaps for that very reason—and because he was really so ridiculously like his mother. . . . There the poor fellow lay. Where was his wife? Where was Elly?

He had seen her neither yesterday nor the day before. What had happened? . . . He had now been sitting for over an hour by Lot's bed, with Lot's hand in his: the boy had closed his eyes again; yet a pressure of that small, thin, delicate hand told his father that he was not asleep, but only resting. . . . Pauws let his son lie quite still, wiped the sweat from Lot's forehead with a handkerchief. . . . Well, he was perspiring nicely, the skin felt relaxed. . . . Patience now, until Lot felt inclined to talk again; patience now, to find out about Elly! Thank God, the beggar wasn't going to die, as Pauws had feared for a moment; but the flesh he'd lost! And he had never had much to spare. How thin his face had grown! How young he looked for his age, even though his fair hair was beginning to turn grey! . . . Pauws had always been very fond of him, because of his calm and gentle character, so very different from his mother's. He had no doubt become so gentle and calm because he wasn't strong: when those violent scenes took place at home, Lot, as a child,

used to go and sit quietly in his corner until the scene had ended. . . . But what could have happened with Elly?

Lot opened his eyes at last, but the old man dared not yet ask after Elly. If it was anything sad, something that he couldn't imagine, then he mustn't ask Lot: it might make the poor boy go quite off his head again. So he merely wiped his son's forehead with some eau-de-Cologne which he saw standing there and asked:

"Are you better, old chap? . . ."

"Yes, Father . . . a great deal better. . . . It seems so strange to me, to have you sitting here . . . but I'm very glad of it. . . . Was I so ill that Mamma had to telegraph? I didn't know it myself. . . . I woke this morning and felt very weak . . . . but quiet. . . . It was a fever, you see, and I caught a bad cold into the bargain, in this beastly winter weather, here. . . . Bronchitis, but not at all serious, you know . . . A touch of influenza as well: nothing out of the way. . . . I shall soon get right with a little nursing. . . . When I'm well, I shall go to the south, to Ottilie: she's still with her Aldo; yes, it can't be helped, they'll never get married. . . . And perhaps they're right. . . . And there you are, sitting by my bed. . . . Well, now that you're here, guv, you're just going to stay at the Hague until I'm better. If you've brought no luggage, you can buy a couple of shirts and a toothbrush. . . .

No, I don't mean to let you go again. Mamma needn't see you, if you don't wish it. But, now that she's been mad enough to wire to you and frighten you out of your wits, she must put up with the worry of it, if it is a worry. . . . Besides, she won't stay very long herself. . . ."

"Don't talk too much, my boy. . . ."

"No, it doesn't tire me . . . meandering on like this. Mamma won't stay long. You don't know anything: I'll tell you how things stand. Steyn has gone . . . abroad; perhaps for good. Mamma has come into money from old Mr. Takma; yes, she came into a hundred thousand guilders. . . . And she is now going to England, with Hugh. . . . And she will stay there, with Hugh, I expect, as long as the hundred thousand lasts. . . ."

"Is that it? Oh, your poor mother!"

"You needn't pity her, Father: not yet, at least. She is very, very happy at the moment. She dotes on her Hugh. I had to fall ill to make her remember that she had a Lot as well. But she was very nice to me: she nursed me, I think. . . . Really, she is *quite* happy. . . . Perhaps in a year or two . . . when the hundred thousand is gone . . . she will come back to me. . . ."

"But what about you, old chap, what about you?" exclaimed the old man, unable to contain himself any longer.

"I? . . . I shall go to Nice first, to take in the sun a bit . . . and then to Italy, to write. . . ."

"But . . ."

"Oh yes, I remember: I've told you nothing yet!"

He closed his eyes, but pressed his father's hand.

There was a knock at the door; the servant put in her head and said:

"If you please, sir, if you please, Mr. Lot, the barber has come. The mistress asked if it wouldn't be too tiring for you. . . ."

"No," said Lot, "let him come up."

"Aren't you really too tired, Lot?" asked Pauws.

"No. It causes me physical pain to look as I do now."

The barber entered with a hesitating but cheerful step: he had a round, jovial face.

"Come along, Figaro!" said Lot.

"Well, sir, are you pulling round? . . . It's over a week since I saw you . . . but I heard that you were ill."

Pauws walked about the room impatiently, sat down petulantly by the window.

"Shave me very nicely, won't you, Figaro?" said Lot. "For I look awful with this beard on me. . . . Yes, you'll find everything on the wash-hand-stand."

"I've brought your own razor, sir."

"That's right, Figaro. . . . I'm glad to see your face again. Is there no news? . . . Yes, it's a delight to feel your velvety blade gliding down my cheek. . . . As a matter of fact, it does

one's skin a heap of good to go unshaved for a week or so. . . . But it's heavenly to feel one's face smooth again. . . . That gentleman, Figaro, sitting over there, is my father. . . . But he shaves himself, so don't reckon on him as a customer. . . . I say, Figaro, you might give me a clean suit of pyjamas: there, the second drawer from the top. . . . Yes, one of the silk ones, with the blue stripes. . . . I believe in silk pyjamas, when you're ill. . . . Yes, just valet me, now that you're here, Figaro. . . . Help me on . . . that's right . . . and now pitch the dirty ones into the clothes-basket. . . . Give me a clean handkerchief. . . . And now brush my hair: you'll find some eau-de-quinine over there. . . . And a wet towel for my hands, please. . . . Ah, I feel a king, even after this first, short clean-up! . . . Thank you, Figaro."

"Come again to-morrow, sir?"

"Yes, do . . . or no, let's say the day after . . . to spare my skin, you know. Day after to-morrow. Good-bye, Figaro. . . ."

The barber went away. Pauws said:

"How can you be such a baby, Lot?"

"Father, come and sit here now. Look, I'm a different creature. I feel ever so much revived with my soft skin and my silk pyjamas. Tuck me in at the back, will you? . . . Have a grape! . . ."

"Lot . . ."

"Oh yes, you wanted to know! . . . I re-

member, you don't know anything yet. I'll tell you, Father. Elly is at St. Petersburg."

"At St. Petersburg?"

"Yes, Father."

"What's she doing there?"

"I'll tell you. . . ."

"Have you quarrelled, has she gone away, has Elly gone away?"

"Do have patience. What an impatient old man you are! No, we haven't quarrelled. . . . Elly is going to the war."

"The war?"

"To Mukden. . . . She's joining the Red Cross at St. Petersburg."

"Elly?"

"Yes."

"My God!"

"Why, Father? It's her vocation. She feels that she must obey it; and it is fine of her to do so. . . . She and I discussed it at length. I did not think it my duty to oppose her. I went with her to the Russian minister. I helped her with all her preparations. She is very strong and very plucky; and she has become even pluckier than she used to be. . . . She used to nurse the sick poor once, you know. . . . Father, I saw her at Florence: a little boy of six was run over by a motor-car. She took him up in her arms, put him in a cab and drove with him to a doctor . . . whereas *I* almost fainted! . . . Whether she will stay with the

Red Cross I can't tell; but I am convinced that, as long as she does, she will devote herself with all her might and main. . . . You see, she's like that, Father; it's the tendency, the line of her life. . . . Each of us has a different line. Getting married and trying to draw two lines into one by a legal foot-rule is all nonsense. Aldo and Ottilie are right. . . . But, though Elly and I are married according to the legal foot-rule . . . she is free. Only, I . . ."

He paused and then went on:

"I suffered, when she went away . . . for who knows how long. . . . I am so intensely fond of her . . . and I miss her, now that she has been mine."

"The damned baggage!" cried Pauws.

Lot took his father's hand:

"Don't say that, Father. . . ."

"Those damned women!" cried Pauws. "They're all . . . they're all . . ."

He could not find his words.

"No, Father, they are not 'all.' . . . Each of them is different . . . and so are we. . . . Don't talk like that, don't talk of 'men' and 'women.' We are all poor, seeking, straying human beings. Let her seek: that is her life. In seeking, she does fine things, good things . . . finer and better things than I. . . . Here, read her letter: she has written to me from St. Petersburg."

"No, Lot, I will not read her letter. Her place is with her husband, especially when he is ill. . . ."

"She doesn't know that I'm ill. Surely you wouldn't telegraph to her to come over from St. Petersburg, as you came from Brussels, because I've had a touch of fever. Father, don't condemn her. . . ."

"Yes, I do condemn her and I condemn you too, for your cowardice in letting her go, for not being a man and compelling her to stay with you."

Lot clasped his hands:

"Father," he said, gently, "don't speak like that. Don't speak like that. You pain me so. . . . And I have suffered so much pain as it is: not pain, but sorrow, sorrow!"

A great sob shook his body and he burst into tears.

"My boy, my poor, dear boy!"

"Father, I am not plucky, but I will try to be. And calm. And quiet. . . . Don't leave me just yet. Mamma is going to England with Hugh. Listen: she will never see Steyn again. He has gone away for good. . . . Now that she has money, now that she has Hugh, the rest means nothing to her, even I am nothing to her. . . . Don't leave me. Come with me to Nice, come with me to Italy. . . . Don't abandon me to my sorrow; but don't let us talk about it either; and please don't condemn Elly again . . . if you and I are to remain friends. She does as she is bound to do and she can't do otherwise."

His voice sounded manlier; and old Pauws was

surprised at the energy with which he uttered the last words. . . . Yes, he was surprised. . . . That was certainly another breed than his; and those were ideas, views, conditions which were totally beyond his reach! Not to get married in church; after a few months' marriage, to allow your wife to join the Red Cross; and to feel sorrow at her leaving you, but to consider that it couldn't be different and that she was doing what she had to: those, you know, were conditions, views, ideas so far removed from his own that, in his swelling indignation at what Elly had done, they all whirled before his eyes; and he felt that he belonged to another breed, to another period. He gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, but did not wish to express any more of his utterly different and doubtless old-fashioned feelings; and, when Lot repeated his request that he should stay with him, he merely answered:

"Yes, my boy, *I'll* stay with you! . . . ."

And the emphasis which he laid upon the words was the only comment that he allowed himself. Lot gave a deep sigh and left his hand in his father's. A few seconds later, the old man noticed that Lot had fallen asleep. He released his hand from his son's slack fingers and stole from the room on tiptoe, unperceived by Lot.

Pauws remained standing on the landing. . . . Yes, it was all whirling before his eyes. That was not the way in which he had loved, with so much

self-control and philosophy and understanding of another's soul: he had loved differently, more ardently, more passionately, with simple, fierce virility. . . . Now, after many years, he was in his wife's house and he felt that, though she was old, he still loved her . . . . that he had always loved her and that, gradually, his love for her, no longer fierce, passionate or ardent—for the old years were growing cold—had become abiding and fond. . . .

He remained standing, irresolutely. . . . What should he do? . . . Something hesitated within him: whether to stay here, in the house, or rush out into the rain! He could not have stayed another minute in Lot's sick-room: the air oppressed him; and, active old man that he was, he felt a need, after what he had heard, to move about, to shake himself, to shake himself free of the whirl of those views and ideas which were so strange to him. . . . And yet! . . .

Slowly he went down the stairs; and his heart thumped like a young man's. . . . Where would she be? There! . . . He heard her voice in the drawing-room, the voice which he had not heard for years, talking English with her son, with her son Hugh! They were laughing, they were laughing together: Hugh's voice sounded coaxing, roughly caressing; her voice sounded . . . oh, it sounded as it had always sounded: so intensely sweet . . . and bewitching! . . . Had she really grown

older? . . . A fierce, rebellious jealousy boiled up within him because of that son who was not his son, that son whom he had seen for two seconds in Lot's room, that son who was like his father . . . Trevelley! He clenched his fists. He felt inclined to dash open the door with those fists and to rush into the room and say furious words, do furious things. . . .

But no . . . no . . . it was all past. Only think: years had gone by. . . . She was sixty: he could not imagine her that. . . . She was happy, so Lot had said; she would be happy, as long as her money lasted. . . . She was sixty years of age, but she remained a child; and not till later, when she was a very old woman—who could tell: perhaps ill and broken and miserable?—after that fellow had run through her money . . .

He pulled the latch of the front-door, went out into the street, into the rain. Very softly he closed the door after him. Oh, he could not, could not come back again and hear her voice once more behind that drawing-room door! . . . He would write to Lot from the hotel . . . that he would certainly not leave him, that he would go abroad with him, but that he could not come back to Ottilie's house, now that Lot was mending, and that he would wait for him in Brussels . . . to go south together. . . .

CHAPTER XXX

THE sunny days had come, at the end of April, in Naples; and Lot, from his room, across the green-lacquered palms of the Villa Nazionale, saw the sea stretch blue, a calm, straight, azure expanse, hazing away, farther towards the horizon, in a pearly mist, from which, in dreamy unreality, Castellamare stood out with brighter, square white patches. . . .

He looked out of his high window, feeling a little tired after his walk with Steyn, who had just gone, after sitting with him for a long time. He had been glad to see Steyn, feeling lonely at the departure of old Mr. Pauws, who had gone back to Brussels after spending two months with Lot. Yes, the old gentleman had been unable to stand it: the scorching April heat in Naples was too much for him, whereas it sent Lot into the seventh heaven. Lot was quite well again. That had been a pleasant time with Papa: they had gone for long excursions in the Campaigna and latterly in the environs of Naples; and this constant living in the open air, without fatiguing himself, had done Lot a world of good: he felt himself growing stronger daily. Then old Pauws left him: Lot himself had insisted upon Papa's going, dreading that the sun-swept, southern

spring, in Naples of all places, would affect the old gentleman's health, hale and hearty though he might be. And so old Pauws went back, regretting that he had to leave Lot by himself, but pleased with the time which they had spent together and with the harmony that existed between him and his son, who was so very different from him.

This was all because of Lot's character; he gave Lot full credit for it, for he himself was a brusque, somewhat rough, masterful man, but Lot, with his yielding gentleness and his not so very cynical laugh, smoothed away, with native ease, anything that might provoke a conflict or want of harmony between an old father and a son who was still young.

Yes, Lot was glad that Steyn had broken his journey and put in a day or two at Naples. Though Lot had acquaintances at Naples and he saw them regularly, he had found in Steyn something to remind him of home and his country and his family. It happened fortunately that Steyn arrived after Lot's father had left, so that there was no possibility of a painful meeting between these two husbands of his mother. And yet they had nothing to reproach each other with: "Mr." Trevelley came in between them! . . .

But Lot was very tired after his talk with Steyn. It all whirled before his mind, it swam before his eyes, which gazed out at the white fairy-city, at Castellamare in the pearly distance. . . . Steyn had said so much to him, revealed to him so much

that he did not know, so much that Lot would probably never have known but for Steyn, things to which he was a stranger, which were strange to him, but which nevertheless made him seize and grasp and understand all sorts of things, suddenly, suddenly: sensations experienced as a child, in the little house in the Nassaulaan, Grandmamma's house. . . . Yes, Steyn, in the confidence arising from their association, after first lunching together, had told him of the letter which he had read, in the act of tearing it up, with Adèle Takma in the old gentleman's study; and Lot, in utter stupefaction, had heard everything: Lot now *knew* . . . and thought that he alone knew, together with Steyn and Aunt Adèle. . . . How terrible, those passions of former days, of hatred, of love, of murder! He now saw, in that narrow drawing-room, each at a window, those two very old people sitting and waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting. . . . Now, now it had come, what they had so long waited for. . . . Now, now they were both dead. . . . Oh, to grow so old, under so heavy a life's secret: he could never do it, he thought it too terrible! . . . And, gazing wearily into the pearly evening distance, which began to turn pink and purple in the reflection of the setting sun, he felt—he, the grandchild of those two murderers—felt dread descending upon him, gigantic, as a still invisible but already palpable, wide-winged shadow: the dread of old age. O God, O God, to grow so old, to wait

so patiently, to see things pass so slowly! . . . It took away his breath; and he shivered, closed the window, looked out through the closed window. . . . Oh, he had not the passion that had filled those old people; his neutral-tinted soul would never let itself be tempted to any sort of passion; his disillusioned, nerveless, dilettante nature contemplated the violent things of this life with a slightly bitter little smile, thought them superfluous, asked itself, why? . . . So heavy a life's secret he would never have to bear, no; but there was so much else—so much melancholy, so much silent suffering and loneliness—that, feeling the shadowy dread sink down upon him, he asked:

"O God, O my God, *can* I ever grow so old? So old as those two old people were? . . . Is it possible that I shall slowly wither and fade, gradually dying and dragging myself along, always with that same gnawing at my heart, always with that same sorrow, a sorrow which I cannot yet utter to anybody, to anybody . . . not even to Steyn . . . because I will not judge, because I *can* not judge . . . because Elly is right from her point of view . . . because she lives in what she is now doing and would pine if she always remained with me, by whose side she feels herself to be useless . . . aimless . . . aimless? . . ."

O God, no, let him not grow old, let him die young, die young and not, year after year, feel the dread pressing more and more heavily on his small,

vain soul, his soul so childishly terrified of what was to come! . . . Let him not, year after year, feel that dread gnawing more and more at his heart, like an animal eating his heart away, and let him not, for years and years on end, feel that silent sorrow weeping within him, never uttered or shown, not even to Elly, if she ever came back, because he would want to assure her with a smile that he understood her aspirations and respected them and approved and admired them!

Loneliness was all around him now: his father was gone, Steyn was gone; Elly was so far from him, in a sphere to which, despite her letters, he was so little able to follow her in thought, a sphere of terror and horror so great that he kept on asking himself:

"Can she do *that?* . . . Has she the strength to keep it up? . . . Those hospitals . . . the din of the battlefield thundering in her ears . . . the sufferings of the wounded . . . their cries . . . their blood: could she hear and see all that . . . and devote herself . . . and act? . . ."

When he saw it looming up out of her hurried letters, it was so terrible a vision that he did not see Elly in it: she faded and passed into somebody else, he did not know her, hardly knew her even in the photograph which she had sent him and in which he vacantly looked for his wife among a number of other Red Cross nurses. . . . No, in this photograph she looked neither like him nor Mamma:

she was herself this time, another, some one quite different. . . . The energy of her undreaming, harder eyes startled him: in this portrait he saw, in a sort of bewildered ecstasy, a willing, a striving perhaps to transcend the bounds which she already saw before her! . . . Oh, was it possible that she might soon return, worn out, and fall asleep in his arms? Had he the right to wish it, for himself . . . and for her? Ought he not rather to hope that she would persevere and live according to the career which she herself had chosen? Perhaps so . . . but to him it was such an unspeakable grief that she was not there, that she was not by his side, she whom he had come to love as he never thought that he could love! . . .

And this made everything so lonely around him. What were a few pleasant, intelligent, artistic friends at Naples, with whom he chatted and dined now and again at a restaurant? And beyond that there was nothing, nothing; and that . . . that perhaps was how he would have to grow old: ninety-three, ninety-seven years old! Oh, how that dread shuddered, that shadowing dread, which would always grow colder and colder still, as he grew older! O God, no, no, let him die young, while still in the flower of his youth, though his life was morbid; let him die young! . . .

Even Mamma was not with him now! She was in London: there lay her last letter; and in her angry written words she complained that Hugh was

such a man for girls, always out with girls, leaving her alone! . . . She saw John now and again, saw Mary now and again; but she suffered agonies because Hugh neglected her, though he always knew how to come to her when he wanted money! It was the first letter in which she expressed herself so angrily, unable to restrain herself, because she suffered so from the sting of jealousy in the flesh of her heart: jealousy because Hugh amused himself with other women, with girls, more than with his mother! And Lot pictured her, alone, spending a long, dreary evening in her room at the hotel, while Hugh was out, with his girls. . . . Poor Mamma! . . . Was it beginning so early? But, now that she had Hugh, whom she worshipped, it would last as long as she had any money left . . . and only then, when it was all finished, would she come back to him, to Lot . . . and, if Elly had returned by that time, then she would be jealous of Elly! . . .

Yes, that would be the future, without a doubt . . . Beyond a doubt, he had not seen Elly for the last time; beyond a doubt she would come back, wearied, and sleep, sleep off her weariness in his arms. . . . And he would see his mother again also: older, an older woman, worn out, penniless; and she would cry out her grief, cry out her grief in his arms. . . . And he, with a little laugh of disillusionment, would find a chaffing word of consolation . . . and the days would drag by, the things would pass . . . pass very, very slowly . . .

not full of red remorse and hatred, passion and murder, as they had passed for those two very old people . . . but full of an inner canker, inner grief and inner, painful suffering, which he would never express and which would be his secret, his, his secret: an innocent secret, free from all crime and other scarlet things, but as torturing as a hidden, gnawing disease. . . .

It was evening now. Well, he would not go out to look for his friends. He would stay indoors, sup off a couple of eggs. . . . It was late; and the best way to forget was to light the lamp cosily . . . and to work, to work quietly, in his loneliness. . . . Come! He had made the room look homely; there were green plants and white plaster casts and warm-coloured pieces of drapery; there were fine brown photographs on the walls; and he had a big table to write at and the lamp was burning nicely now, after spluttering a little at first. . . . Come, to work: his dilettante work, the work which he could do best. . . . To recast and rewrite those articles on the Medicis—O sweet memories of Florence!—that was his work for this evening. . . . Come, every one must be the best judge of his destiny: Elly of hers, he of his; and that this was so was really not worth distressing yourself for all your life long. There were beautiful and interesting things left, especially in Italy; and spring in the south was such an undiluted joy. . . . Come, let him soak himself in it now, quietly and in

solitude . . . and work, work hard and forget. . . . There was nothing like work: it took your thoughts off yourself and all those dreadful things; and, though you withered and faded in working, still you withered and faded with no time for repining. . . . And yet it was terrible, terrible . . . that one could become as old as Grandmamma had become . . . as Mr. Takma had become! . . . Well, suppose he wrote a novel: a novel about two old people like that . . . and about the murder in Java?

He smiled and shook his head:

"No," he thought, almost speaking aloud, "it would be too romantic for *me*. . . . And then there are so many novels nowadays: I'll keep to my two. . . . That is enough, more than enough. Better by far rewrite the Medici series. . . ."

And, as the chill of sunset was over and the starry night outside was growing sultry, he flung open the windows again, drew a deep breath and sat down to his big table, by his bright lamp. . . . His fair and delicate face bent low over his papers; and, so close to the lamp, it could be seen that he was growing very grey at the temples.

THE END

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